

A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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22-03 FREDERIC EDWIN CHURCH

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Frederic Edwin Church,
El Khasne Petra, 1874

- This is Section 22 on nineteenth-century American art and this talk is on Frederic Edwin Church the pupil of Thomas Cole who I covered in last week's talk.

NOTES

Fifteen major works by Frederic Edwin Church in chronological order, from his earliest finished paintings to his final large-scale landscapes:[1][2]

1. *Niagara Falls (Horseshoe Falls)*, c. 1844[1]
2. *Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness*, 1846[1]
3. *Storm in the Mountains*, 1847[1]
4. *To the Memory of Cole*, 1848[1]
5. *West Rock, New Haven*, 1849[3][1]
6. *Abandoned Skiff*, 1850[4][1]
7. *Beacon, off Mount Desert Island*, 1851[3][1]
8. *The Wreck*, 1852[1]
9. *Cotopaxi*, 1855[1]
10. *The Andes of Ecuador*, 1855[5][1]
11. *South American Landscape*, 1856[6][4][1]
12. *Niagara*, 1857[7][5][1]
13. *The Heart of the Andes*, 1859[8][9][1]
14. *The Icebergs*, 1861[10][1]
15. *The Aegean Sea*, 1877[11][1]

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BIOGRAPHY

- **1826:** Frederic Edwin Church was born on May 4, 1826, in Hartford, Connecticut, to Joseph Church, a **prosperous silversmith and banker**, and Eliza Janes Church. His **privileged upbringing** in a Congregationalist household gave him early access to art and culture, and his **father's wealth** and connections would play a vital role in fostering his burgeoning artistic talent.[1][2][3][4]
- **1844–1846:** At age eighteen, **Church became the first student of Thomas Cole**, the founder of the Hudson River School, after Daniel Wadsworth—a family friend and founder of the Wadsworth Atheneum—arranged the mentorship. **Church spent two years with Cole in Catskill**, New York, joining him on numerous sketching trips throughout New England and the Catskill Mountains, rapidly developing his skills in both drawing and painting.[2][3][1]
- **1847–1857:** After finishing his studies with Cole, **Church moved to New York City** and quickly established himself as an independent artist. He was **elected an Associate of the National Academy of Design** in 1848 and promoted to **full member** the following year, at which point he also began teaching his own students. His early major works included *Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford, in 1636* (1846). **Church found quick success**, soon attracting important patrons and achieving wide acclaim. His **national fame was cemented** when he exhibited the monumental canvas **Niagara** (1857), remarkable for its vivid naturalism.[3][5][4][1][2]
- **1853–1859:** Eager for new sources of **inspiration**, **Church travelled to South America** in 1853 and 1857, exploring the **Andes** and the tropical landscapes of **Ecuador and Colombia**. These expeditions resulted in a series of large, panoramic works, most notably ***The Heart of the Andes*** (1859), widely celebrated for its detailed depiction of equatorial environments and shown to great acclaim in New York.[4][1]
- **1860:** Church **purchased farmland** along the Hudson River near Hudson, New York, where he would later **construct his famed estate, Olana**. That same year, **he married Isabel Carnes**, whom he had met during an exhibition in 1859. The couple went on to have **four children**, and their

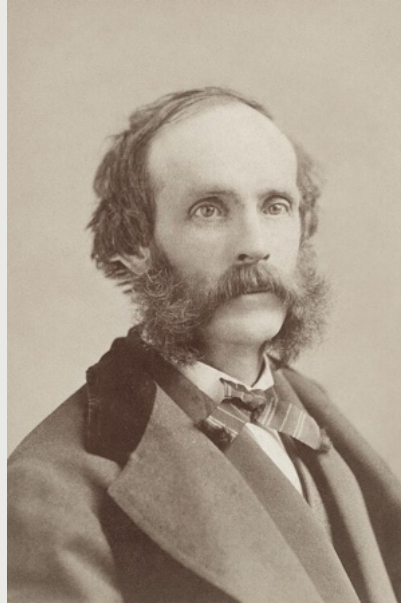
family life was marked by both **happiness and tragedy**—two of their children died young, a sorrow that deeply affected Church.[6][3][4]

- **1867–1869:** Entering a new stage of life, **Church travelled with his wife and children to Europe and the Middle East**, including London, Paris, Egypt, the Holy Land, Greece, and Turkey. He spent extended periods in **Rome**, visited the **ruins at Petra**, and sketched the **Parthenon in Athens**. These travels inspired numerous later paintings, notably *El Khasné, Petra* (1874) and *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives* (1870).[5][1][4][6]
- **1872–1900:** Church **completed** the construction of **Olana**, his **Persian-inspired estate** overlooking the Hudson, which he designed himself and surrounded with **elaborately landscaped grounds**. Although by the **late 1870s his reputation had waned somewhat**, he continued to paint and care for Olana, which had become the heart of his family and creative life. Despite suffering from **debilitating rheumatoid arthritis**, Church remained active artistically as his health allowed, documenting views of the Hudson Valley, Aegean, and Middle East in his later paintings.[3][5][4]
- **April 7, 1900:** Frederic Edwin Church **died at the age of seventy-three** at Olana, leaving a legacy as **the most famous member of the Hudson River School** and a painter whose career embodied the 19th-century American experience of nature, exploration, and artistic innovation.[1][4][3]

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Photograph by Napoleon Sarony,
Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900),
c. 1868

Photograph by Napoleon Sarony, Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), c. 1868

- This is Frederic Edwin Church, born on May 4, 1826, in Hartford, Connecticut, to Joseph Church, a **prosperous silversmith and banker**, and Eliza Janes Church. He had a **privileged upbringing** in a Congregationalist household gave him early access to art and culture, and his **father's wealth** and connections would play an important part in supporting his developing artistic talent.[1][2][3][4]
- A family friend, Daniel Wadsworth arranged for Church to **became the first student of Thomas Cole**, the founder of the Hudson River School. **Church spent two years with Cole in Catskill**, New York, and joined him on numerous sketching trips around New England and the Catskill Mountains, rapidly developing his skills in both drawing and painting.[2][3][1]
- By the way, he never painted a self-portrait. This is a photograph by a very popular portrait photographer at the time called Napoleon Sarony.



Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Niagara Falls (Horseshoe Falls)*, c. 1844, 111.4 × 119.1 cm, Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma

- Church painted this, *Niagara Falls (Horseshoe Falls)*, when he was eighteen and is **one of his earliest known works**. He was newly apprenticed to Cole and the painting shows his early fascination with grand natural landscapes. Unlike his **later celebrated 1857 Niagara** panorama, this earlier version is **more modest in scale** but it already shows his commitment to direct observation and precise detail.
- It reflects his **extensive field studies**, as he made **sketches on-site during summer visits**. At this stage, Church was **still deeply influenced by Thomas Cole**, but he was beginning to emphasise a more realistic and immersive view of nature.
- The painting captures the **turbulence** of the falls with dynamic brushwork, showing water plunging dramatically over rocks framed by mist and rugged landscape. Though smaller and less panoramic than his later works, the scene still conveys a sense of the raw power and majesty of Niagara Falls, a natural wonder admired across America and Europe during the 19th century.
- Thomas Cole had already noted Church's "**finest eye for drawing in the world**," an observation that would be borne out in Church's rapid rise in the art world.

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness*, 1846, 102.24 × 153.35 cm, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness*, 1846, 102.24 × 153.35 cm, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut

- This is *Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness from Plymouth to Hartford, in 1636* (1846), a **significant early work** and an **historic subject**.
- The **Reverend Thomas Hooker**, was a prominent **Puritan minister** and one of the founders of the **Connecticut Colony**. In June 1636, **Hooker led about 100 members of his congregation**, including men, women, and children, from the Massachusetts Bay Colony through the wilderness to the Connecticut River Valley. It was a journey through **dense forests** and across rivers, a distance of **85-90 miles** that took some two weeks. When they arrived they founded Hartford and contributed to the establishment of a new, more democratic civil government.[5][7][8]
- This work was painted while Church was still an apprentice to Cole and it shows his influence, blending grand natural landscapes with American historical and moral narratives.
- We see Hooker and his followers bravely journeying through a **wild and untamed** New England landscape, capturing the sense of **religious pilgrimage** as well as the formidable beauty and challenges of the American wilderness.[8][5]
- Church's choice of this subject was **deeply personal: born in Hartford, Connecticut**, he was **intimately connected to the region's history and**

institutions. The painting was **immediately successful**—it was accepted into the **National Academy of Design’s annual exhibition** and purchased for the **Wadsworth Atheneum**, Hartford’s new museum, founded by Church’s patron Daniel Wadsworth. *Hooker and Company* thus stands not only as evidence of Church’s early artistic maturity but also as a reflection of national identity and local pride, characteristics that would continue to define his later, grander landscapes.[5][8]

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Storm in the Mountains*, 1847, 75.5 × 62.8 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art

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- After finishing his studies with Cole, **Church moved to New York City** and quickly established himself as an independent artist. He was **elected an Associate of the National Academy of Design** in 1848 and promoted to **full member** the following year, at which point he also began teaching his own students. **Church found quick success**, soon attracting **important patrons** and achieving wide acclaim. His **national fame was cemented** when he exhibited **Niagara** (1857), remarkable for its vivid naturalism.[3][5][4][1][2]
- Church's intention with this painting was to **evoke the sublime force** and unpredictability of the natural world. Dominating the scene is a **lightning-blasted tree**, an emblem not only of **nature's destructive power** but also its **cycle of life and death**. Church's study of light, atmosphere, and detail reflects his belief in nature as a site of spiritual revelation and awe, aligning with the transcendent ideals of American landscape art in the mid-19th century. This approach was heavily influenced by his mentor Thomas Cole and by **the theory of Luminism**, which emphasized the spiritual effects of light in landscapes.
- At its debut, "Storm in the Mountains" was **celebrated for its dramatic realism and technical virtuosity**. Church's meticulous attention to detail—the splintered tree, swirling storm clouds, and broken rocks—was praised for **combining scientific observation with artistic imagination**. Critics noted his ability to elicit both awe and humility before the vastness of American nature and viewed the painting as emblematic of the period's expansionist spirit. However, some **later**

critics felt the precision of Church's work sometimes **compromised unity and poetic feeling**, valuing his panoramic techniques but questioning their emotional resonance. Nonetheless, Church's landscapes—including this early canvas—helped define an optimistic and ambitious national identity.

NOTES

- Luminism is a 19th-century American painting style that emphasizes the **quiet, precise depiction of light and atmosphere**—often in serene landscapes. Originating with artists from the Hudson River School, Luminist works are marked by smooth, almost invisible brushwork, careful tonal gradations, and a tranquil sense of space. Painters like Fitz Henry Lane, John Frederick Kensett, Martin Johnson Heade, and Frederic Edwin Church sought to capture the spiritual and meditative qualities of nature through calm compositions drenched in soft, even sunlight. The movement reflects Transcendentalist ideals, evoking nature's sanctity and internal reflection rather than dramatic spectacle or narrative, and its legacy continues to shape American landscape painting today

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *To the Memory of Cole*, 1848, 81.3 × 124.5 cm, private collection

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *To the Memory of Cole*, 1848, 81.3 × 124.5 cm, private collection

- Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900) had a **profound and formative relationship** with Thomas Cole (1801–1848), the founder of the Hudson River School and Church's teacher and mentor from 1844 to 1846. Cole, born in England but raised in the United States, **was already a well-established artist** known for his allegorical and majestic landscapes that celebrated the American wilderness. Church came to Cole as an eighteen-year-old with exceptional drawing skills, quickly earning **Cole's praise** as "**the finest eye of drawing in the world**" and becoming his only formal student. Their relationship grew beyond teacher-student to a **close friendship**, shaping Church's early artistic development and his eventual prominence within the Hudson River School.[1][2][3][6][10]
- Thomas Cole died relatively young in 1848 at age 47, **just two years after Church completed his apprenticeship. Cole was buried in Catskill, New York**, near his beloved landscape inspiration. The painting *To the Memory of Cole* (often also called *Old Sentinel*) by Church is a tribute to his mentor and reflects Church's **reverence for both Cole** as a person and the natural landscape Cole so famously celebrated. The painting depicts a **lone, towering tree—a "sentinel"** standing guard over the Catskill Mountains—with a simple cross on a distant mound, symbolizing memory and reverence rather than marking Cole's actual burial site. The cross is therefore symbolic, representing Christian remembrance and the lasting spiritual and artistic legacy of Cole, rather than

signifying a literal grave marker in the scene.[6][7][10]

- In sum, Church's "To the Memory of Cole" captures the emotional resonance of **grief, respect, and continuity in the Hudson River School tradition**, commemorating the passing of a master whose teachings profoundly shaped Church's trajectory.[10][1]

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *West Rock, New Haven*, 1849, 67.3 × 101.6 cm, New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *West Rock, New Haven*, 1849, 67.3 × 101.6 cm, New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut

- *West Rock, New Haven* (1849) was painted when he was just 23 and it illustrates his transition from student to master of American landscape painting. He had completed his studies under Thomas Cole two years before and this work demonstrates his growing confidence in depicting the sublime American wilderness that would define his career.
- The painting shows the dramatic **sandstone ridge** overlooking New Haven, Connecticut, rendered with the meticulous attention to **geological detail** that would become Church's signature. Unlike Cole's more romanticised landscapes, Church approached West Rock with **scientific precision**, studying the rock formations, atmospheric effects, and seasonal changes with the eye of a naturalist. This analytical approach reflected the emerging American interest in **empirical observation**, positioning Church at the forefront of a new artistic movement.
- The shadow of a clock divides the landscape into distinct regions that captivate the eye. In the foreground is a peaceful river and farm workers gathering in the corn. Our eye is drawn up to another patch of sunlight, a glimpse of the same river, and a distant church spire all overlooked by the sandstone ridge which rises majestically in the background. The top two-thirds shows towering clouds in the late afternoon.
- At this stage in his development, Church was **establishing his reputation as**

Cole's most promising successor in the Hudson River School. *West Rock* demonstrates his mastery of luminous skies and dramatic lighting effects, techniques that would reach full fruition in later masterpieces like *Niagara* (1857) and *Heart of the Andes* (1859). The painting's composition reveals Church's growing confidence in balancing topographical accuracy with artistic vision.

- The work also reflects Church's deep connection to New England landscapes during his formative years. **Before embarking on his famous expeditions to South America and the Arctic**, Church found profound inspiration in familiar terrain. *West Rock* captures this intimate knowledge of local geography while hinting at the grand scale and ambition that would characterise his mature work.

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Frederic
Edwin Church
(1826–1900),
*Abandoned
Skiff*, 1850,
28 × 43.2 cm,
Thyssen-
Bornemisza
Museum,
Spain

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Abandoned Skiff*, 1850, 28 × 43.2 cm, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Spain

- Frederic Edwin Church painted *Abandoned Skiff* in 1850 at age twenty-four, during his formative years as a student of Thomas Cole, the founder of the Hudson River School. This early work demonstrates Church's developing mastery of landscape painting techniques that would later make him one of America's most celebrated artists.
- The painting depicts a weathered boat pulled up on a rocky shore, surrounded by detailed renderings of New England's coastal vegetation and geological formations. Church's meticulous attention to botanical and geological accuracy reflects the Hudson River School's commitment to scientific observation, influenced by the writings of Alexander von Humboldt, the German naturalist whose theories about the interconnectedness of nature would profoundly shape Church's artistic philosophy.
- At this stage in his career, Church was still working under Cole's direct influence at the master's Catskill studio. Cole had taken Church as his only formal pupil in 1844, recognizing exceptional talent in the young artist. The relationship proved mutually beneficial—Cole appreciated Church's technical precision, while Church absorbed Cole's romantic vision of the American wilderness.
- *Abandoned Skiff* represents a transitional moment in American landscape painting. While maintaining Cole's emphasis on moral allegory—the abandoned vessel suggesting themes of human transience against nature's permanence—

Church's approach shows greater naturalistic detail than his mentor's more idealized compositions. This precision would become Church's signature, distinguishing him from contemporaries like Asher Durand.

- The work predates Church's famous expeditions to South America and the Arctic, which would inspire his monumental canvases like *Heart of the Andes* (1859) and *The Icebergs* (1861). Yet even in this modest coastal scene, Church's ability to combine scientific accuracy with poetic sentiment is evident. The painting reveals an artist already developing the technical skills and philosophical approach that would eventually earn him international acclaim and establish him as Cole's most successful successor in capturing America's natural grandeur.

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Beacon, off Mount Desert Island*, 1851, 79 × 1,17 cm, private collection

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Beacon, off Mount Desert Island*, 1851, 79 × 1,17 cm, private collection

- *Beacon, off Mount Desert Island* was painted in 1851, one year after his first documented visit to Maine's Acadia region. He was growing more independence from his former mentor Thomas Cole, who had died in 1848. While contemporaries like Asher Durand focused on pastoral inland scenes, Church increasingly gravitated toward dramatic coastal subjects that allowed him to explore maritime themes and lighting conditions. This approach distinguished him from other Hudson River School painters and anticipated his later interest in exotic locations.
- We see a **lighthouse on a rocky outcrop** off Mount Desert Island, rendered with Church's characteristic precision in capturing atmospheric effects and geological detail. The beacon serves both as a navigational marker and symbolic reference to divine guidance, reflecting the Hudson River School's tendency to embed moral meaning within landscape subjects. Church's treatment of light—particularly the interplay between natural sunlight and the lighthouse's artificial beacon—demonstrates his advancing technical skills in representing luminous effects.
- **Mount Desert Island became a recurring subject** for Church throughout the 1850s. He made multiple sketching expeditions there, often **accompanied by fellow artists or wealthy patrons**. These trips were part of Church's **systematic approach** to landscape study, influenced by **Alexander von Humboldt's scientific methods**.

- Alexander von Humboldt was a pioneering Prussian naturalist and explorer whose writings inspired artists to see nature as an interconnected whole, combining scientific observation with poetic expression. His influence spurred American landscape painters—especially Frederic Edwin Church—to adopt fieldwork methods, meticulous detail, and a panoramic vision that united art and science. Humboldt's celebration of America's natural wonders helped shape the ideals and ambitions of the Hudson River School and 19th-century landscape art.
- The work **predates Church's famous South American expeditions by several years**, yet it demonstrates the observational rigour that would characterise his mature style. The painting's combination of topographical accuracy with romantic sentiment **established Church's reputation** among collectors, helping secure the financial stability that would later fund his **ambitious travels to Ecuador and beyond**.

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *New England Scenery*, 1851, Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, MA

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *New England Scenery*, 1851, Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, MA

Church's "first true composite landscape"—it used sketches from various locations to develop a more detailed and spatially complex landscape than found in Cole's work

- *New England Scenery* (1851) is a **composite** rather than a direct depiction, blending **meticulously observed studies** of New England's terrain, including **waterfalls, mountains, bridges, livestock, and mills**. Church assembled these elements into an **imaginary panorama**, expressing both the pastoral beauty and the industrious spirit of the region.
- **One anecdote** recounts Church's habit of making **dozens of sketches** on walking tours of rural New England, sometimes joined by young students whom he trained to capture the landscape precisely. In *New England Scenery*, Church included a **covered bridge** and a **Conestoga wagon**, elements symbolizing westward expansion and progress, while the presence of cattle and figures reflects daily rural life. The Conestoga wagon was developed in the 18th century by German immigrants to Pennsylvania for transporting goods over rough roads. It was pulled by four or six horses and could hold up to eight tons and became a symbol of early American expansion and commerce.
- An oft-reported detail is **Church's addition of a human figure in red on the bridge**—historians suggest this may be **Church himself**, blending artist into subject.^{[1][2][4][3]}

- Church's painting was contemporary with works by fellow Hudson River School artists including **Asher B. Durand and John Frederick Kensett**, who also celebrated the American northeast through idealized, but carefully studied, landscapes. The work's scale and detail attracted positive public attention when exhibited at the Art-Union in New York City, helping to confirm Church's reputation as Cole's successor. The influence of Alexander von Humboldt, whose writings on nature Church read avidly, is reflected in the painting's focus on **ecology and interconnectedness**.^[4]

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *The Wreck*, 1852, 76.2 × 116.84 cm, The Parthenon, Nashville, Tennessee

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *The Wreck*, 1852, 76.2 × 116.84 cm, The Parthenon, Nashville, Tennessee

- *The Wreck* was painted in 1852, showing his growing ambition and technical prowess on the eve of his national breakthrough. The work depicts a shipwreck scene—sunset, turbulent sea, and the remnants of disaster—created during a period when Church was steadily building his reputation. He was exploring new subjects and ways to evoke drama not only through landscape, but also through the theme of human struggle against nature.[3][5]
- It reflects his knowledge of marine art and his responsiveness to the seascape trend popular among both American and European artists. Several contemporaries were experimenting with coastal scenes but Church's take is distinctive for its compositional clarity and realistic depiction of atmosphere—details such as the sunset and brooding clouds were meticulously observed, suggesting Church's habitual practice of making field studies at dawn and dusk, sometimes standing for hours to capture changing light.[5][6][7]
- He would sketch along the coast from Maine to Nova Scotia. He was particularly fascinated by stories of storms and wrecks recounted by local mariners and often included such events as motifs in his oil studies. *The Wreck* was acquired by The Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee, where it remains today, and is considered an important precursor to Church's later, more grandiose treatments of the sublime in nature.[2][3]

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Cotopaxi*, 1855, 71.12 × 107 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Cotopaxi*, 1855, 71.12 × 107 cm, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

- Eager for new sources of **inspiration**, **Church travelled to South America** in 1853 and 1857, exploring the **Andes** and the tropical landscapes of **Ecuador and Colombia**. These expeditions resulted in a series of large, panoramic works, most notably ***The Heart of the Andes*** (1859), which we will look at later.
- This shows the active volcano **Cotopaxi in Ecuador**, a peak that Church visited during his 1853 expedition with Cyrus Field. The journey marked Church's first extended travel outside the US and had a profound impact on his landscape painting.[1][5]
- It shows the volcano emitting smoke and ash beneath a glowing sunrise, combining precise geological observation with a larger symbolic meaning. Church was influenced by the writings and illustrations of **Alexander von Humboldt**, a Prussian naturalist who extensively documented South America's natural landscapes, volcanoes, and ecology. Church's numerous studies and sketches from the trip helped him depict the Andes with scientific accuracy while still engaging the ideals of the Hudson River School, which sought to reveal the divine in nature.[4][6]
- The painting includes **palm trees**, which **do not naturally grow** near Cotopaxi; their **presence is symbolic**, referencing **ideas of paradise and the Garden of Eden**. Some scholars suggest the imagery of the volcano's smoke and fiery eruption resonated with contemporary audiences as a metaphor for the **political**

and social turmoil leading up to the American Civil War. The painting was commissioned by James Lenox, a philanthropist and collector **who admired British artists such as J.M.W. Turner**, whose dramatic treatment of light and atmosphere might have influenced Church's approach.[2][4]

- Church created **at least ten paintings of Cotopaxi** over his lifetime, with this 1855 work considered among the **most accomplished**. It is now in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. [5][1]

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *The Andes of Ecuador*, 1855, 121.9 × 194.3 cm, Reynolda House Museum of American Art, North Carolina

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *The Andes of Ecuador*, 1855, 121.9 × 194.3 cm, Reynolda House Museum of American Art, North Carolina

- Here, in *The Andes of Ecuador* (1855) he captures different climate zones found in the Ecuadorian Andes—from snowy mountain peaks to tropical flora in the foreground by creating a composite. This painting is notable for being **Church's largest work at that time** and an early example of **Luminism**, focusing on how light interacts with the landscape.[1]
- He was heavily influenced by **Alexander von Humboldt** and Church reflects Humboldt's description of the Andes arranged in two parallel lines with a plateau in between; represented here by Mounts Tungurahua and Cotopaxi. Church's reliance on field sketches made during his travels in Ecuador and Colombia directly informed the detailed plants and animals, especially the grazing llamas in the foreground, yet the overall luminous light unifies and softens these details in a manner reminiscent of Thomas Cole's emphasis on the sublime.[1]
- *The Andes of Ecuador* also carries **subtle Christian symbolism**. **Two staffage figures near a stone cross** and a **Spanish mission** reflect Church's ongoing theme of humanity in harmony or awe before nature, reinforcing the Hudson River School's moral undertones. The painting was **well-received** upon its exhibition at Boston Athenaeum in 1855, where it was seen by figures such as Henry Thoreau, and purchased by railway magnate William H. Osborn, signalling Church's rising stature in American art.[1]

BIOGRAPHY SUMMARY

- Frederic Edwin Church was born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1826 to Joseph Church, a silversmith and banker, and Eliza Janes Church. Growing up in a prosperous family, Church was exposed early to art and nature, nurturing his natural talent. At 18, he became the first pupil of Thomas Cole, the founder of the Hudson River School, studying with him for two years and accompanying him on sketching trips across New England.[5]
- By 1847, Church had established himself independently in New York City. His early success included his historical painting "Hooker and Company Journeying through the Wilderness" (1846), which depicted the Puritan minister Thomas Hooker's migration to found Hartford. This work gained him recognition and was acquired by the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford.
- The 1850s marked a period of exploration and major achievements for Church. His 1853 trip to South America inspired several landmark paintings, including "Niagara Falls" (1857) and "The Heart of the Andes" (1859). These ambitious canvases combined meticulous natural detail with grand panoramic composition, reflecting Church's fascination with nature's sublime power.
- In 1860, Church married Isabel Carnes, and they settled in Hudson, New York. He built Olana, a Persian-style estate that blended architecture and landscape, becoming both home and artistic retreat. Church continued painting landscapes inspired by his travels, including the Middle East, until his death in 1900, leaving a legacy as a master of American landscape painting.
- Church's life intertwined artistic innovation with deep engagement in naturalism and exploration, positioning him as a key figure of the Hudson River School and American art history.[9][10][11][12]

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *South American Landscape*, 1856, 59.5 x 92 cm, Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, Madrid

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *South American Landscape*, 1856, 59.5 x 92 cm, Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum, Madrid

- *South American Landscape* (1856) was painted in Church's New York studio. It synthesises different motifs and ecosystems observed during his travels into a single panoramic view, rather than depicting one specific location. The landscape combines tropical vegetation with Ecuador's iconic **Chimborazo volcano** and man-made elements such as a church on a hill and a waterfall, reflecting Church's interest in merging natural detail with human presence.[1]
- It is now housed in the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum in Madrid and the museum's description points out that the palm tree, the Chimborazo volcano, the female figure in the foreground, the waterfall below a bridge on the left and the church on the hillside, fit together awkwardly. The female figure standing beside the path invites us to experience the scene as if embarking on a journey, a device Church used to engage public imagination. He has eliminated a clear middle ground, creating a striking visual leap from lush forest in the foreground to the high snowy peak in the distance. All these elements combined with the minute detail brought him great fame during his lifetime.
- During the painting's creation, Church was also preparing for his second South American trip in 1857, bringing heightened anticipation and shifting his focus toward more rugged and dramatic landscapes. At the same time, Church worked on *Niagara* (1857) which considerably advanced his national reputation.[2][1]

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Niagara*, 1857, 101.6 cm × 229.9 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Niagara*, 1857, 101.6 cm × 229.9 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

- This is *Niagara* (1857). It was a **key milestone** in his career and in 19th-century American art. It captures the **Horseshoe Falls** section of Niagara Falls with remarkable naturalism and a **panoramic composition** spanning over **seven feet wide**. Church produced it after several visits and extensive studies of the site, including sketches from both the U.S. and Canadian sides. Unlike earlier romanticised depictions, Church **immersed viewers directly into the scene**, placing them near the rushing water's edge with no foreground elements to cushion the view.[1][2]
- In 1857, Church organized a **unique one-picture exhibition in New York**, charging admission and building anticipation **like a blockbuster** event. **Tens of thousands visited**, often bringing **opera glasses** to admire the intricate detail, **such as the floating tree trunk** that offers scale and tension near the falls' edge, and the **partial rainbow** formed by the mist.
- **Critics praised the painting as a masterpiece** that finally succeeded in depicting Niagara's power and grandeur. The painting's success **propelled Church to fame and wealth**, positioning him as **the leading American landscape artist** of his era.[3][4]
- *Niagara* reflects influences from his teacher Thomas Cole, the British art critic John Ruskin's aesthetic theories, and emerging Luminist techniques emphasizing light and atmosphere. The canvas reflects a blend of scientific

observation and romantic awe, characteristic of Church's mature style.[2][4]

- The painting took about six weeks and he used two similar canvases simultaneously: a "draft" upon which he tested a painting idea, and the final canvas, to which he transferred the results he found satisfactory. A technique similar to that used by John Constable to create his "six-footers".
- **The public debut of Niagara was a sensation:** exhibited alone in a New York gallery, it drew **tens of thousands of viewers**—some with opera glasses to scrutinise its minute details—and was subsequently displayed in cities across the US and Europe. Copies and reproductive prints spread *Niagara's* fame further, and the original set auction records for an American painting by the 1870s. [1][2]
- Critics hailed it as a new pinnacle for American art, elevating both the Hudson River School and Church himself. One critic wrote "**Of the hundreds of paintings made of Niagara, before Church and after him, this is by common consent the greatest.**". The painting's runaway popularity **transformed Church into a wealthy, widely celebrated figure**, and Niagara remains today an icon not only of his career but of 19th-century American cultural identity.[3][4][9][2]

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *The Heart of the Andes*, 1859, 168 cm × 303 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *The Heart of the Andes*, 1859, 168 cm × 303 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

- The other of his most famous works, this is *The Heart of the Andes** (1859), one of the **most celebrated American landscape paintings of the 19th century** and a **crowning achievement** in his artistic career. After two trips to South America in 1853 and 1857, Church synthesised **countless sketches and studies** into this large-scale, panoramic landscape depicting an **idealized Andean scene**. The painting combines tropical forests and waterfalls in the foreground to snow-capped Mount Chimborazo in the background—presenting a range of ecological zones in one unified composition.[1][4]
- It integrates detailed botanical accuracy, with over 100 identifiable plant species, alongside symbolic elements,
- (CLICK) such as a church and cross, expressing harmony between nature and human presence. Church intended the painting to be both educational and emotionally immersive, creating an experience for viewers to explore the richness of a remote landscape from their New York studio.[6][1] (CLICK)
- Church exhibited the painting with dramatic effect, **employing gaslights, a darkened room, and a specially designed frame resembling a window to heighten the illusion** of viewing an actual landscape. His show attracted large crowds, with **over 12,000 visitors paying an admission fee to view the work**. The exhibition marked the peak of Church's fame during his lifetime and came to symbolize the grandeur of American landscape art.[2][1]

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *The Icebergs*, 1861, 163.8 × 285.7 cm, Dallas Museum of Art

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *The Icebergs*, 1861, 163.8 × 285.7 cm, Dallas Museum of Art

- In **1860** Church **bought farmland** along the Hudson River near Hudson, New York, where he would later **construct his famed estate, Olana** (pronounced "oh-LAN-nuh"). That same year, **he married Isabel Carnes**, whom he had met during an exhibition in 1859. The couple went on to have **four children**, and their family life was marked by both **happiness and tragedy**—two of their children died young, a sorrow that deeply affected Church.[6][3][4]
- *The Icebergs* (1861) is a significant work created following his **1859 Arctic voyage around Newfoundland and Labrador**, where he made extensive sketches of icebergs. The painting captures the stark beauty of towering ice formations in afternoon light, emphasizing geological detail and the play of light on translucent ice. Measuring over five by nine feet, the painting stands as **one of Church's large-scale "Great Pictures"** and exemplifies his ability to combine detailed naturalism with atmospheric effects.[1][3]
- He exhibited it in New York in 1861 and charged admission to this single-painting show, a strategy he also used with *Niagara* and *The Heart of the Andes*. The painting **attracted attention** for its unique subject: an Arctic seascape unlike the more familiar lush landscapes of his previous works. Church **added a ship's mast to the scene midway through the exhibition**, providing human scale and a narrative suggestion of nature's power over man. This addition responded to critics' calls for some human element or story within the composition.[4][6][1]

- Set against the **backdrop of the American Civil War's outbreak**, public interest was somewhat **muted** compared to earlier exhibitions. Nevertheless, *The Icebergs* **deeply influenced other artists** and sparked increased curiosity about Arctic exploration. The painting **disappeared from public view** after being sold to a British collector, only to be **rediscovered in 1979 in Manchester, England**. In 1986, it was **auctioned for a record price** for an American painting and became part of the Dallas Museum of Art's permanent collection.[5][1]
- Anecdotes reveal his dedication: despite **sea sickness**, he rowed **close to icebergs** to capture their form accurately. His travels were part of a broader American fascination with polar exploration and natural science in the mid-19th century.[1][4]

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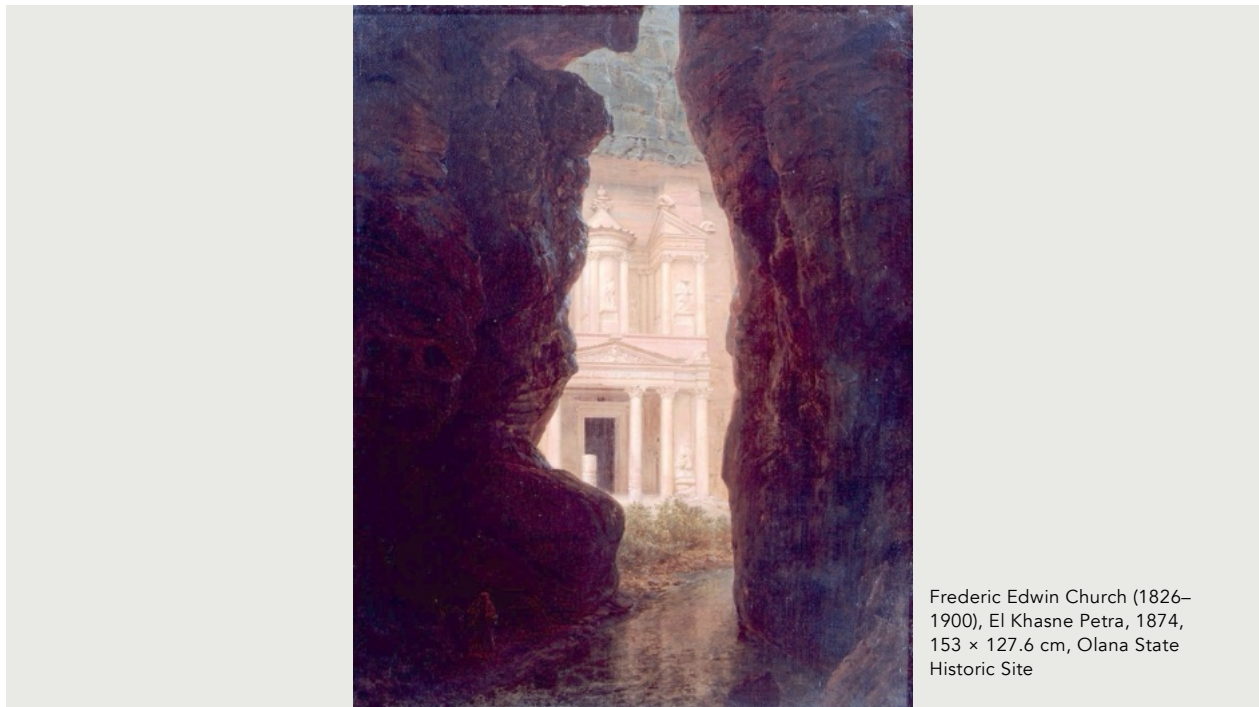
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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), El Khasne Petra, 1874, 153 × 127.6 cm, Olana State Historic Site

- Between **1867 and 1869** he entered a new stage of life. He **travelled with his wife and children to Europe and the Middle East**, including London, Paris, Egypt, the Holy Land, Greece, and Turkey. He spent extended periods in **Rome**, visited the **ruins at Petra, as shown here**, and sketched the **Parthenon in Athens**. These travels inspired numerous later paintings, notably this painting, *El Khasné, Petra* (1874) and *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives* (1870).[5][1][4][6]
- This painting stands out as a unique and intimate work from his later years. It depicts the Al-Khazneh temple (commonly known as The Treasury) in **Petra, Jordan**, a site Church **visited in 1868**. This painting differs from much of Church's earlier expansive landscapes since it presents a framed, **almost claustrophobic view** of the temple as seen through the **narrow canyon called the Siq**, the only access route to the site.[1][2]
- Church created the work as a **gift for his wife** and designed its frame to complement the painting, with the salmon-colored sandstone reflecting in the decor of his home, Olana. The composition captures the initial moment of revelation that Church himself described in his diary, **calling the temple "astonishing"** and like it was **"shining as if by its own internal light."** The temple's façade is monumental and radiant, framed by dark rock walls which create a sense of depth and focus on the mystery of the hidden city beyond.[2][3][1]

- The surrounding rocky passage and the **barely discernible Bedouin figures emphasise scale** and context but also provide a sense of foreboding and isolation. Church reportedly **faced potential danger sketching in Petra**, as the area was known for **banditry**, and **spying by foreigners on sacred sites aroused suspicion**. Despite this, Church worked steadily, gaining the **trust of local guides**.^[1]
- The painting is thought to be **one of the last canvases Church painted entirely with his right hand**, as rheumatoid arthritis began to limit his abilities. It was exhibited at the National Academy in 1874 and remains displayed at Olana State Historic Site in New York, his historic home.^{[2][1]}

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Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *The Aegean Sea*, 1877, 137 × 161 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *The Aegean Sea*, 1877, 137 × 161 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

- This is *The Aegean Sea* (c. 1877), one of his **last major large-scale paintings**, created after his extensive travels through Europe and the Middle East between 1867 and 1869. Unlike his earlier focus on American and South American landscapes, this painting is a **composite, imaginative scene synthesising architectural and natural elements** from multiple Mediterranean and Near Eastern sites Church visited, including Petra, Baalbek, Syria, Athens, and Constantinople (modern Istanbul).[1][3]
- It is what is known as a **capriccio style**, where disparate architectural ruins—such as the **rock-cut entrance to Petra** and the **Roman columns of Baalbek**—are assembled into a **cohesive, yet imagined, landscape**. The distant ruins evoke classical Greece, with the Acropolis and the Temple of Apollo suggested, along with the domes and minarets of a mosque, bridging antiquity with the Ottoman presence. This blending reflects Church's desire to connect historical, Biblical, and spiritual themes, aligned with his Protestant beliefs, during a period when scientific challenges to faith were growing.[2][3][1]
- The atmospheric effects include a **double rainbow** and a cloudy sky, also reveal the **influence of British Romantic painter J.M.W. Turner**, whose work **Church studied in London in 1869**. The idealized lighting and harmonious arrangement indicate a move away from Church's strictly naturalistic approach toward a more poetic and symbolic interpretation.[1][2]

- Between **1872 and 1900** he **completed** the construction of **Olana**, his **Persian-inspired estate** overlooking the Hudson, which he designed himself and surrounded with **elaborately landscaped grounds**. Although by the **late 1870s his reputation had waned somewhat**, he continued to paint and care for Olana, which had become the heart of his family and creative life. Despite suffering from **debilitating rheumatoid arthritis**, Church remained active artistically as his health allowed, documenting views of the Hudson Valley, Aegean, and Middle East in his later paintings.[3][5][4]
- On 7th **April, 1900**: Frederic Edwin Church **died at the age of seventy-three** at Olana, by then largely forgotten. However, he left a legacy as **the most famous member of the Hudson River School** and in recent years his reputation has slowly grown. The growth in his reputation was driven by the rediscovery of *The Icebergs* and its sale in 1979 for a record-breaking sum of \$2.5 million. The subsequent National Gallery of Art exhibition, *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1825–1875*, solidified his standing as a central figure in 19th-century American painting and following these pivotal events, the National Gallery of Art has continued to organise major exhibitions of his work.

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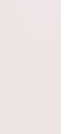
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Frederic Edwin Church
The Heart of the Andes,
detail, 1859, The Met

- He is now regarded as one of the leading American landscape artists of the nineteenth century.
- Thank you for your time and attention and I look forward to giving my next talk in the series.



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