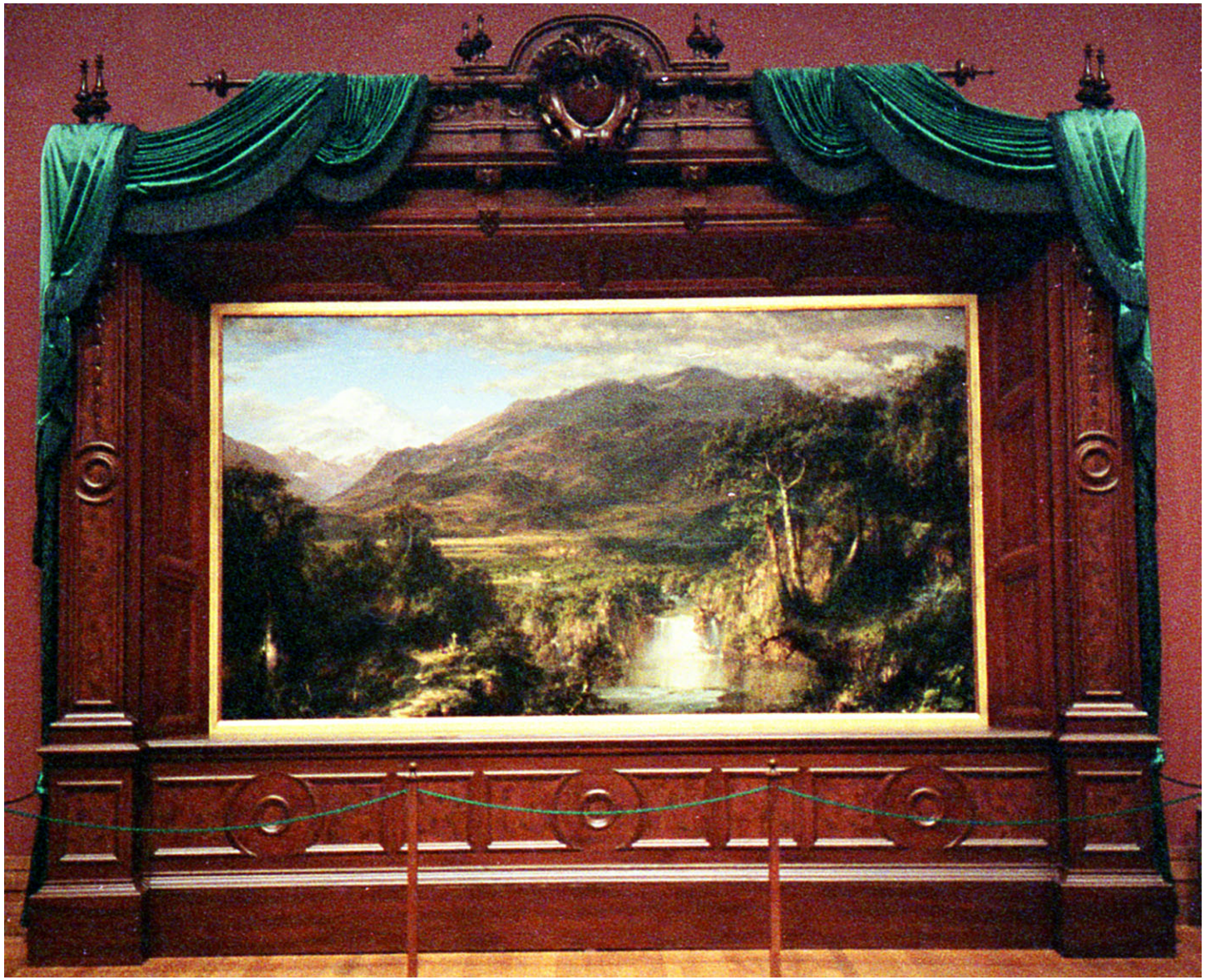
“Heart of the Andes”

1859 Oil on Canvas
66 1/8” x 119 ¼”
Frederick Edwin Church
(1826-1900)

Review by V.G. De Mario
2005



Heart of the Andes

“The Heart of the Andes” is the most celebrated work by the leader of the second generation Hudson River School. It comes as no surprise the painting attracted more than 12,000 viewers during its three weeks in exhibition in New York in May 1859. Its presentation in a dark curtained frame was designed to look like a window and it was placed in a darkened chamber with carefully devised illumination. Certainly, the London public marveled during that summer, and the painting went on tour of the United States until 1861.

Church was one of the most widely traveled of the painters of the Hudson River School, painting large landscapes in locations ranging from Ecuador to Labrador, and from Niagara Falls to Jerusalem. While this may be so, one his most outstanding achievements took place from his examination of South American vistas. One could argue that his most ambitious endeavor was “The Heart of the Andes” (Wall text, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, 2005).

Frederic Edwin Church was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1826. Coming from wealth, the young man was able to pursue his interest in art. At sixteen, he was studying drawing and painting and two years later, through strategic connections, became a pupil of Thomas Cole, the founder of the Hudson River School. A gifted man, Church’s work was being exhibited at the National Academy of Design within a year. At the tender age of 22, he set up a studio in New York and received his first student, William Stillman (the Artchive, 2005).

The Hudson River School came under ridicule for being touted as a *school.* Instead, it was composed of painters whose interests lied mainly in the depiction of nature and its relationship to Man, and sharing a similar artistic "*school of thought,*" if you will. Except for Albert Bierstadt, born in Germany (1830-1902), and Thomas Cole, born in Lancashire, England (1801-1848), most of the members were home grown. Frederic Church (1826-1900), Asher B. Durand (1796-1886), Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904), George Inness (1825-94), and John Kensett (1818-72), were born in the Northeast in close proximity to the city. A remarkable aspect in terms of longevity is that their work in scenic painting spanned 50-60 years. These artists used an endless variety of locations from which they drew inspiration. Natural landscape outgrew most other genres in the public's collective eye. In the 1820s, America was young, and growing culturally, commercially, scientifically, and politically. Because America was becoming a major harbor of wealth since the War of 1812, Americans found Europeans to be condescending to what they termed the "New Man."

The school paralleled, indeed outstripped contemporary American movements in portraits, stills, genre, and history, as did the naturalism in landscapes. Just as in the War of 1812, Americans were at odds with Europeans. They saw Americans as crude and lackluster. Hence, with an acute awareness of these opinions, and eager to prove otherwise, American writers, cultural painters, and leaders like Washington Allston and Samuel F. B. Morse, returned with a vengeance to stabilize the American artistic footing (Howat, 1972).

American artists were the pioneers of vistas. The mid-1800s saw the dawn of a significant tradition in landscapes. The painters of the Hudson River School were

meticulously rendering hills and lakes, valleys and rivers of a young continent. Along with Church, John Kensett, Sanford Gifford, Martin Johnson Heade, Fitz Hugh Lane, and George Inness created a sizeable number of paintings around the time of the Civil War (Davidson, p 78). To satisfy his creative yearnings to record the more remote and exotic natural terrain, Church traveled to, among other locales, South America. He would sketch the outdoors and return to the studio like Monet, Cézanne, and other artists to paint. Moreover, his version of the panoramic "Andes" can be compared to Bierstadt's "The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak" (Davidson, 1980).

Church figured as the most prominent and accomplished of Cole's students. A "nation and nature" painter not limited to American soil, his renderings are of epic proportion. He is described as a quintessential painter and I would have to agree with an evaluation as such (Lukacher, p. 159). One would have to be extremely diligent and persistent in keeping with the caliber of work that is to Church's credit. It was evident he never veered away from integrity and an immaculate artistic work ethic. In terms of atmosphere, foliage, and mountainous possibilities, he conveyed the message that he understood on an unfathomable level, the "will and spirit of a divine nature" (Lukacher, p. 159). In fact, the viewer is assaulted, through the artist's expression, with a marvelous dose and balance of tranquility and turbulence.

Church's "Cotopaxi" (1862) could, in part, be considered similar to "Andes" in its grandiose stature content-wise, except it offers striking elements of danger although distant enough to the viewer to remain safe. If his works were a revelation of his empirical lifestyle, I would venture to say he was not only a gifted man, but also a privileged one.

As you may have thought, I found myself comparing Church's work to that of Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902). Bierstadt, like Church, specialized in panoramic depictions of various magnificent landscapes, only his were generally of the American West. "Andes" possesses a similar flavor with respect to content, palette, and composition to that of Bierstadt's "The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak" (1863) (Howard, p. 22). One contrast could be that "Rocky Mountains" is taken from home turf, while "Andes" was sketched in South America. Admittedly, the terrain in "Andes" is a bit more ruggedly detailed whereas "Rocky Mountains" gives the viewer a sense of stillness, tranquility, and people (Shoshone Indians) in the soft setting of their every day life are more the focus. Although I have never been to South America, I have been to such far-reaching parts of the globe as Alaska, Hawaii, and Ireland, and have toured all but perhaps seven of the 50 United States.

Within my own empiricism, I can visualize the magnificence of the Andes as fervently as if they were the Rocky Mountains or the Grand Canyon. Both paintings happen to be roughly 6' x 10' in size. While worthy in its own right, "Rocky Mountains," in my estimation, would still take a back seat to "Andes" had I had the opportunity to view them together again today.

Mrs. Margaret Dows generously bequeathed the "Andes" painting to the Metropolitan Museum of Art ("the Met") circa 1909. It was noted that the older members of the Met would welcome this news aware of the commanding position held by Mr. Church (1968, p.70). Having reached middle age myself, I can personally understand the feeling of appreciation from such an event, as I elaborate on later.

Also interesting to note, a reception was held, a private viewing if you will, for members of the Met and their families on January 4, 1909. The reception was intended to mark the opening of the Exhibition of Contemporary German Art. Guests were advised to arrive at the main entrance on Fifth Avenue. In fact, having visited the Met several times personally, and actually standing in the same spot many times myself, gave me a sense of connection to, a sense of appreciation of this function.

Among those expected to receive said guests were J. Piermont Morgan ("J. P. Morgan" is a name I recognized immediately. I believe his modern-day equivalent would be "the Donald," otherwise known as Donald Trump.). Accompanying Morgan were William Church Osborne, who's name, at first glance, I misconstrued as being a relative of Frederic E. Church, and Robert W. de Forest. The latter gentleman contributed this reference point concerning Church to "The Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art." Several foreign dignitaries made up the remainder of the receiving line. A final noteworthy point is that Church himself was among the founders of the Met and served for a period of time as a Trustee (1968, p.11).

I chose this artwork mainly due to the avalanche of emotions that washed over me at first viewing. I appreciate all facets of art and various genres, yet I have a weakness, a propensity, or even a keen eye, if you will, for massive, complex landscapes. I believe it is its massiveness that immediately brings to mind how it makes me feel, how it got there, and how long it's been there in its present state. Certainly, I feel a sense of almost being *in* the painting, a *part* of the painting.

The artwork itself is an elaborate presentation which encompasses many vignettes. It's a painting that takes a while to soak up entirely. Church incorporated

finer detail and an assortment of brush strokes to create different moods and add subtleties. There are only two people in the whole of the composition, a testimony to man's minuteness to the massiveness of nature. The grain of the canvas may be seen through the paint to the left of the smaller waterfall. The painting is rendered in a wide range of colors. The sky is a peaceful, calming blue. Clouds are a mix of grays, purples, violets, and bright whites. Of course, the painting can be divided into two halves with Church's typical panoramic view at the top half.

Chiaroscura blending and muted colors appear in the trees and grass and even among the vibrant waterfall mist. Although in South America, the purple in the mountains transported me back, once again, to the beauty that is North America. Soil is ripped from the earth with trees perched on top in the lower right corner of the foreground. Every tiny leaf, and the foliage as a whole is impeccably representational. The tree bark is precise, realistic, and flawless. Vividly colored red and blue flowers, and ferns may be seen in the lower right aspect mixed in with the greens of the foliage. Water in the lake of the foreground is crystal clear, reflecting in peace and tranquility the rugged warm hues of the hovering cliffs. Leaves may be counted as they flow into the sky gently in the upper right aspect. Upon close inspection, I can make out two people, one in red, one in blue seen in front of the shrine. Actually, even though there is a clear distinction between mountain and sky, at first glance they seem to blend. Church possessed an extraordinary ability to detail just enough to trick the viewer's eye. As a result, illumination dances on a lone tree's midsection in the lower left aspect.

Its reflection seems to light the rugged path to light the shrine. Yet, just behind the shrine Church shrouded in darkness the background to bring out the shrine.

And finally, beyond that in the near distant midground is yet another lake with an apparent village reflected within. Even at the base of the majestic mountain, Church has skillfully flecked the surface with scattered foliage here and there and what appears to be habitation. The overall picture is that of stunning realism with a hint of religion. Its size lends itself to lingering admiration, taking time to soak up the details of every facet in every corner. With reference to a previous Davidson description, if ever a painting reflected “Nation and Nature” and man’s insignificance in it, this is it.

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