

RALLY 'ROUND Frederic Edwin Church and the Civil War THE FLAG

by Kevin J. Avery

This year marks the sesquicentennial of the fall of Fort Sumter and the start of the American Civil War (1861–1865). Oddly, the war coincided with the richest and most successful phase of the career of America's most renowned nineteenth-century landscape painter, Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900).

Born into the family of an affluent businessman in Hartford, Connecticut, Church

cultivated inborn sympathies for art and science, first as the prodigious student of Hudson River School founder Thomas Cole (1801–1848), then as a devotee of the natural history texts of Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), the German naturalist who explored the equatorial New World at the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1853 and in 1857, Church followed the trail of Humboldt in Colombia and Ecuador. Back in his New York City studio, he fashioned

such monumental vistas as *The Heart of the Andes* (1859; Metropolitan Museum of Art), from a small preparatory study (Fig. 1) based on sketches. Twelve thousand people paid an admission fee to see the dramatically framed

Fig. 1: Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900)
Study for "The Heart of the Andes," 1858
Oil on canvas, 10¼ x 18¼ inches
OL.1981.47. Olana State Historic Site,
New York State Office of Parks Recreation
and Historic Preservation





Fig. 2: Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900)

Iceberg and Steamship, 1893

Graphite and gouache on light gray-green paper, 8 x 13½ inches
OL.1980.1578. Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office
of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation

and lit painting when it was first shown. Not content with the natural variety he found at the equator, Church hired a boat in 1859 and journeyed to near the Arctic Circle. From his sketches and drawings (Fig. 2) he produced on his return *The Icebergs* (1861; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts). To augment his income, Church often had his major works reproduced as engravings, such as the color lithograph of *The Icebergs*.

The New York showing of *The Icebergs* in April 1861 marked the beginning of Church's engagement with the war effort. Just outside the exhibition gallery on Broadway, newly mustered regiments paraded before cheering crowds as they headed for the harbor, where boats and trains would bring them to Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Virginia. Among them were several of the painter's friends and acquaintances, notably, the ardent young



Fig. 3: Charles Risdon, after Frederic Edwin Church

The Icebergs (The North), 1864

Oil over chromolithograph, 20⅝ x 35⅝ inches
OL.1988.744. Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office
of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation

author and attorney Theodore Winthrop, who penned a colorful account of a sketching excursion he made with Church to Maine, and later published a descriptive program for *The Heart of the Andes*.

Unlike Winthrop and other of the enlistees the painter knew, Church was mar-

ried, and only since the year before, to the beautiful Isabel Carnes. He had just purchased farm property along the Hudson River, on which he intended to build a cottage for his prospective family. His ambitions, like those of the wealthy manufacturers, merchants, railroad executives, and financiers who bought his expensive landscape paintings, precluded military service. Nonetheless, the painter's conscience, Calvinist piety—and maybe his entrepreneurial instincts—were piqued. As the troops strode past Church's exhibition, he changed its title from *The Icebergs* to *The North*—a clear allusion to the

Union. Church also arranged for the gate receipts to be donated to the Patriotic Fund in aid of the families of the enlisted.

The war fever of those weeks also prompted what must be the most topical "landscape" Church ever painted. Union outrage at the Confederate assault on Fort



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Fig. 4: Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900)
Twilight, a Sketch, 1858
Oil on canvas, 10¼ x 18¼ inches
OL.1981.47. Olana State Historic Site,
New York State Office of Parks Recreation
and Historic Preservation

Fig. 5: Goupil & Co. after
Frederic Edwin Church
Our Banner in the Sky, 1861
Oil over chromolithograph, 7½ x 11¼ inches
OL.1976.29. Olana State Historic Site,
New York State Office of Parks Recreation
and Historic Preservation

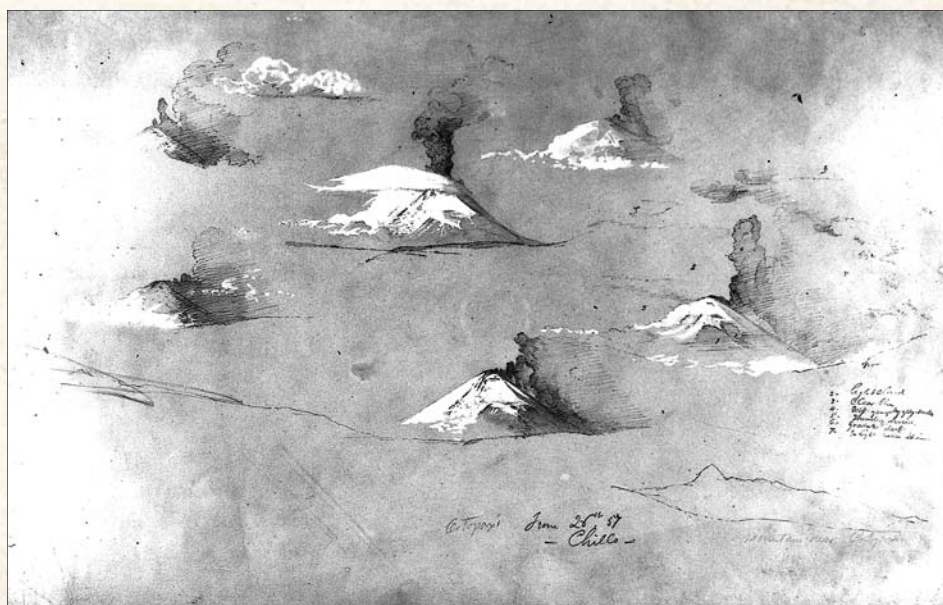
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Fig. 6: Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900)
Study for "Under Niagara," c. September 1858
Oil on paper mounted
to canvas, 11¾ x 17½ inches
OL.1981.51. Olana State Historic Site,
New York State Office of Parks Recreation
and Historic Preservation

Fig. 7: Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900)
Cotopaxi Erupting. Six Sketches, June 26, 1857
Graphite and gouache on
heavy tan paper, 14⅞ x 21⅞ inches
OL.1977.131. Olana State Historic Site,
New York State Office of Parks Recreation
and Historic Preservation

Sumter, South Carolina, had been stoked by the insult to the nation's flag, torn by shell fire even after the white cloth of surrender went up. In reaction, a massive rally was formed in New York's Union Square, where the battle-worn Sumter banner was raised aloft and the indignant crowds waved the stars and stripes. Weeks later Church dashed off a celestial vision of a Union flag composed of parallel bars of scarlet clouds parting to reveal a starry firmament, an image he developed from such earlier works as *Twilight, a Sketch* (Fig. 4) painted in the 1850s. His picture dealer had the work, titled *Our Banner in the Sky*, made into lithographs (Fig. 5), which sold briskly in the following months.

Only once more, and then only as a special request from a private collector, did Church produce anything so baldly patriotic as *Our Banner in the Sky*. Yet his subsequent



major landscape paintings can be read like a barometer of the war. The artist may not have literally joined the fight, but he suffered war-related losses and privations that are subtly manifested in his paintings. His friend and advocate Winthrop fell in the war's first major land engagement at Big Bethel, Virginia. In response to the war, Louis Rémy Mignot (1831–1870), a South Carolinian who joined Church on his second expedition to Ecuador in 1857, emigrated to England in 1862. Many of Church's own farmhands deserted his employ to join the cause, which began to look increasingly dark as unexpected Southern resistance and Northern irresolu-

tion led to multiple Union defeats. During this period the artist painted two of his most fearsome images, *Under Niagara* (1862; unlocated), inspired by an oil sketch done a few years earlier (Fig. 6), and *Cotopaxi* (1862; Detroit Institute of Arts), the Ecuadorean volcano in eruption, based on numerous studies done on location (Fig. 7). Still, the Civil War years also coincided with the births, in 1862 and 1864, of his children, Herbert and Emma. Moreover, the tide of the war began turning for the Union after the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, and with it the complexion of the artist's major pictures: *Chimborazo* (1862–1864; Huntington



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Fig. 8: Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900)

Aurora Borealis, 1865

Oil on canvas, 56½ x 83½ inches

Smithsonian American Art Museum,
Washington D.C./Art Resource, NY.

Fig. 9: Isaac Hayes (1832–1881)

Church's Peak, Arctic Regions, 1860

Watercolor on paper, 7½ x 11½ inches

OL.1980.1894. Olana State Historic Site,
New York State Office of Parks Recreation
and Historic Preservation



Museum and Library, San Marino, California), of a massive Andean summit floating above the jungle like an angelic cloud; *Rainy Season in the Tropics* (1863–1866; Museum of Fine Arts, San Francisco), with its providential double rainbow arcing over a mountainscape; and *Aurora Borealis* (1864–65; Smithsonian American Art Museum) (Fig. 8), painted following several years of the most spectacular occurrences of the northern lights visible in the United States, and often interpreted as omens both foul and fair. A watercolor of Church's Peak

(Fig. 9) by Arctic explorer (and Church pupil) Dr. Isaac Hayes supplied the mountain the artist portrayed in *Aurora Borealis*.

Whatever Church intended to convey in those renderings of dread and smiling natural features and effects, he could not insulate himself from the personal cost that thousands

of families paid with lost kinsmen—to say nothing of their slain president, Abraham Lincoln, assassinated just days after the Confederate surrender in Virginia on April 9, 1865. Nor could he insulate himself from private sorrow. In March of that year, Church and his wife buried both their children, vic-



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tims of diphtheria. Also in 1865, Church learned that John S. Jameson, a young artist, musician, and studio neighbor had died the previous year in the notorious Confederate prison camp at Andersonville, Georgia. Jameson's mother sent Church one of her son's early landscapes (Fig. 10). In early 1867, Church's beloved sister Charlotte died in Hartford, months before Church departed with Isabel and their toddler son, Frederic, on his last great trip abroad. The Churches went first to the Holy Land and then to Europe. Theodore Winthrop Church, namesake of the artist's fallen friend, was born in Rome in 1869. Arriving home later that year, Church resumed work on the estate he would call Olana (Fig. 11), and crowned it with the hilltop citadel he built for the four children the couple would raise. **AFA**

Rally 'Round the Flag: Frederic Edwin Church and the Civil War is on view in the Evelyn and Maurice Sharp Gallery at Olana, Hudson, New York, from May 26 through October 30, 2011. With this exhibition, Olana will participate in a multiyear commemoration of the Civil War, with related regional and national exhibitions, events, and programs being planned by many institutions. The exhibition is funded by The Olana Partnership, the not-for-profit support arm of Olana State Historic Site and a generous grant from The Lois H. and Charles A. Miller Jr. Foundation. Olana, the Churches Persian-inspired home and 250-acre estate, is owned and operated by New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. To learn more, please call 518.828.0135 or visit www.olana.org.

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Fig. 10: John S. Jameson (1842-1864)
Landscape, c. 1860

Oil on canvas, 5 x 9½ inches
OL.1980.1920. Olana State Historic Site,
New York State Office of Parks Recreation
and Historic Preservation

Fig. 11: Carri Manchester, *South Façade
of Olana*, photograph, 2007.