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April 2011 Spotlight Essay

Frederic Edwin Church, *Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta*, 1883



Frederic Edwin Church's *Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta* (1883) is one of the last of the artist's celebrated, large-scale landscapes of South America. Along with his renowned *Heart of the Andes* (1859, Metropolitan Museum of Art) and *Morning in the Tropics* (1877, National Gallery of Art), this painting was inspired by Church's travels to the continent as a young man in 1853 and 1857. Characteristic of his landscape

aesthetic, in *Sierra Nevada* Church rendered the eponymous mountain range that skirts the northern coast of Colombia in painstaking detail, using Western conventions of the picturesque to compose the view. These include the tripartite division of nature, consisting of a foreground filled with dense vegetation and a middleground marked by a tranquil waterway fed by cataracts flowing from the mountain range in the background, all unified by a soft, golden light. Also conventional was the use of trees to frame the composition. While the blasted tree stump to the right was a visual trope used by Church and his fellow Hudson River School artists in their paintings of the American landscape to signify the sublime power of nature, unique to landscapes of South America by Church and other American painters was the symbolic use of palm trees, which in this work rise triumphantly above the skyline. Equated with the "tree of life," the palm tree gave pictorial form to the North American ideal of tropical America as the "long-lost Garden of Eden."<sup>[1]</sup>

Like many of Church's works, the painting does not reproduce an actual view, but instead presents a composite of features conveying the essence of the region. Each meticulous touch and stroke of the brush was aimed at articulating the character of specific types of vegetation and geological formations. Representing the first natural landmark Church encountered in his initial Colombian expedition in 1853, *Sierra Nevada* occupies an important and complex position in Church's career and in American art.<sup>[2]</sup> Painted thirty years after this expedition, at a time when such detailed, panoramic landscapes had fallen out of fashion, it is a triumphant reprisal and culmination of a subject to which Church periodically returned throughout his career, evincing his enduring devotion to dated attitudes toward art and nature at the same time as it reflects back on an exultant place and time of the artist's youth.

Church's aesthetic in *Sierra Nevada* was shaped by the antebellum Romantic belief that nature was the direct embodiment of God. The function of landscape painting, in this view, was

to reveal truths of a divine plan and purpose and give audiences a sublime, spiritual experience of nature. This took on special resonance with paintings of South America, whose primal paradise seemed untainted by civilization and was thought to bear, more than any other landscape, the traces of divine providence. Also shaping Church's fascination with South America, however, was an expanding scientific interest in the region; in the early nineteenth century, biologists, geologists, and geographers turned their attention to the tropics for its rich, exotic flora and fauna. Influenced by the writings of prominent naturalists, Church's paintings of South America couple science with spirituality. For the artist and many others of this time, painting was a means of description and classification in which both minute features and the broader laws of the cosmos were delineated, providing insight into the order of nature and the workings of God, whose powers of creation were reflected in the very act of painting.[3] In this way, artists such as Church took on the role of priest as well as artist, scientist, and heroic explorer, serving as conduits between primeval nature and civilization, between the public and the divine.

Especially influential to Church were the writings of the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. Humboldt had traveled to South America from 1799 to 1804, writing in great detail descriptions of its various climates, natural monuments, vegetation, and animal life, extolling in particular the ability to observe multiple climatic zones within single locales. Finding the tropics to be the supreme manifestation of divine order and of the magnificent complexity of creation, Humboldt called on artists to paint the region as a means of charting its "physical phenomena" and bringing to nonnative audiences its natural wonders. For him, the close study of tropical nature in particular provided "knowledge of the chain of connection, by which all natural forces are linked together, and made mutually dependent upon each other," and he believed "it is the perception of these relations that exalts our viewers and ennobles our enjoyments." [4]

Thus encouraged by the German naturalist's model, Church and other American artists took it as a cultural responsibility to paint the South American tropics. From the 1830s to the late 1870s, some thirty artists made voyages to the exotic paradise filled with natural wonders.[5] In *Sierra Nevada* Church presented, to use Humboldt's words from decades earlier, a scene in which "the depths of earth and the vaults of heaven display all the richness of their forms and the variety of their phenomena." In the foreground lies the "inexhaustible fertility of the torrid zone" (the warm, wet, and verdant climate that extends north and south of the equator), and beyond the waters rise the cataracts, what Humboldt described as the "rocky walls and abrupt declivities of the Cordilleras [Andes]." [6] Considering the image in its entirety, with its synthesis of vignettes, Church also represented the cycles of nature and the "great chain of connection." The sun provides energy for the vegetation while melting the snow of the mountains, which streams down the cataracts into the river, feeding the flora and fauna of the lowlands that, in turn, release their energy into the air, and the cycle begins anew.

*Sierra Nevada*, however, was painted in 1883, when such idealizing beliefs about nature were undermined by materialist worldviews. Darwin's radical theories in *The Origin of Species* (1859), which held increasing sway in the US in the last quarter of the century, posited a godless,

amoral world of chance, violence, and conflict in place of the benign world of unity and order cherished by Church and others of his generation. In its representation of a universe of balance and harmony, *Sierra Nevada* can be seen as a bulwark against post-Darwinian perspectives, defending pantheistic attitudes toward nature as well as the importance of the landscape painter's role as an emissary for the divine.

Church's initial fascination with South America in the 1850s was not only scientific and spiritual, but was also influenced by political relations between the United States and Latin America, especially as defined by the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. In this official policy, the US took a proprietary attitude toward Central and South America and overtly attempted to prevent European countries from interfering with them. Though political interests were primarily focused on countries in immediate physical proximity to the US, this attitude extended to regions to the south as well. Indeed, South America was even seen as "the geographical extension of the United States" and often referred to as "our southern continent" or "our tropical regions." [7] In this framework, the very act of painting the landscape was an act of appropriation, claiming a kind of patriarchal ownership and further encouraging the expansionist mindset in the age of Manifest Destiny. Although political interests in South America were on the wane by the 1880s, *Sierra Nevada* still manifests this patriarchal and expansionist attitude toward the continent. Eliding any portrayal of the modernization that had begun "spoiling" South America's pristine nature, the painting depicts the realm as a sublime, Edenic paradise untainted by modernity and bearing the traces of divine presence.

J. Gray Sweeney observes that *Sierra Nevada* can also be seen as an effort to reclaim the success of Church's earlier South American landscapes, which created a sensation both for critics and the public when first exhibited in the 1850s. [8] Serving as a final valediction to his tropical series, *Sierra Nevada* is also tinged with nostalgia for a past when his art was at the height of its power and popularity and his tropical views of South America brought the artist national fame. The towering, epic mountains featured in such earlier paintings as *Heart of the Andes* give way here to a range that, by contrast, seems diminished and enervated, worn by the passage of time. This, along with the implication of a waning sunset casting its last golden light on the landscape below, suggests the closing of an era and perhaps symbolizes a yearning for the sublime, exotic experience affiliated with his past. Or, they may also allude to the falling-out-of-fashion of monumental landscape painting and scientifically detailed panoramas, of which Church was one of the most famous practitioners. At a time when representations of the human figure and nature cast through more subjective, poetic lenses were more fashionable and artists, accordingly, turned toward the subjects and styles of European art rather than American nature itself for inspiration, *Sierra Nevada* represents a vindication of its own style. Executed when the artist was afflicted by rheumatism to the point where he was forced to learn to paint with his left hand, the painting may also symbolize a longing for the technical prowess of his youth. Read this way, though infused with melancholy, *Sierra Nevada* stands as a defense of Church's craft and a tribute to unwavering ideals toward art and nature in the face of sweeping cultural transformations, when his prominent position in American art was fading from public memory.

<sup>1</sup> Katherine Manthorne, “The Quest for Tropical Paradise: Palm Tree as Fact and Symbol in Latin American Landscape Imagery, 1850–1875,” *Art Journal* 44 (Winter 1984): 374–82.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to a friend, Church recalled: “[Santa Marta] was the first snow peak I ever witnessed and [it] made a profound impression which my memory has perhaps exaggerated.... I saw it from sea level at Barra[nq]uilla, looking across the Magdalena River where it is several miles wide and a low horizon.... I noticed a peculiar light high up in the sky which a single glance revealed to be ‘Sta Marta’—Little else than the great pyramid of snow was visible but it was wonderfully grand.” Quoted in J. Gray Sweeney, “Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta,” in Joseph D. Ketner, et al., *A Gallery of Modern Art at Washington University in St. Louis* (St. Louis, MO: Washington University Gallery of Art, 1994), 44.

<sup>3</sup> On this peculiarly American and romantic role of the artist, see Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*, vol. 1 (1845), trans. E. C. Otte (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 23.

<sup>5</sup> For an in-depth study of this cultural phenomenon and its aesthetic and political implications, see Katherine Manthorne, *Tropical Renaissance: North American Artists Exploring Latin America, 1839–1879* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Humboldt, *Cosmos*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> See Manthorne, *Tropical Renaissance*, 3–5.

<sup>8</sup> Sweeney, “Sierra Nevada,” 44.