



FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT
WRITERS IN MUSEUMS 1798-1898

EDITED BY
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10. Illuminating the Big Picture: Frederic Church's *Heart of the Andes* Viewed by Writers

Katherine Manthorne



Fig 10.1 Frederic Church, *Heart of the Andes*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1859. Wikimedia. Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Church_Heart_of_the_Andes.jpg

One of America's most renowned landscapists, Frederic Church, based his large-scale *Heart of the Andes* in 1859 (Fig. 10.1) on his two trips to South America in 1853 and 1857.¹ He painted it at his studio in the new

1 For details of Church's South American travels see my *Tropical Renaissance. North American Artists Exploring Latin America, 1839–1879* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989).

Tenth Street Building, which provided artists with large workspaces lit by gas and a central exhibition room two stories high with a large glass ceiling.² After the 5 x 10 ft. canvas left the artist's studio it went on a single-picture exhibition tour from 1859 to 1861, during which it was arguably seen by more people and under more varied viewing circumstances than almost any other painting of its day. It opened in New York City, first at Lyric Hall and then in the gallery at Tenth Street; it crossed the Atlantic to German Gallery, London and then to Edinburgh; back to New York's Kurtz Gallery; then on to the Boston Athenaeum and Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Heading south, it got only as far as Baltimore. Next it traveled to the Midwest — to Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis — and subsequently Low's Building, Brooklyn. After paying a record \$10,000, William Blodgett then enjoyed it briefly at his brownstone at 27 W. Twenty-fifth Street before he lent it to New York's Metropolitan Fair in 1864. It appeared again at New York's Chickering Hall in 1876. At each of those venues the physical space and mode of lighting differed, which in turn affected the look of the picture, as Church was acutely aware. Prior to electricity's advent in 1881, artworks were illuminated via a succession of methods. During daylight hours, sunlight entered the studio or gallery either via a skylight or window, which often provided the north light preferred by most painters. Emanuel Leutze's *Portrait of Worthington Whittredge Painting in his Tenth St. Studio* (1865; Reynolda House Museum of American Art) depicts the artist at work under natural light emanating from a window overhead. If artists toiled into the night or if they wanted to work on overcast or rainy days, however, artificial light was needed. Initially, candles provided illumination, as celebrated in Joseph Wright of Derby's *Three Persons Viewing the Gladiator by Candlelight* (1765; Private Collection). Here the artist makes dramatic use of characteristically strong contrasts of light and shadow, which of course posed challenges when the artist was actually at work. Always quick to embrace new technologies, Charles Willson Peale created the so-called 'Lamplight Portrait' of his brother James Peale painting by the light of an Argand oil lamp (1822; Detroit Institute of Arts), a recent innovation. Then along came the

2 Annette Blaugrund, 'The Tenth Street Studio Building: A Roster', *The American Art Journal*, 14 (Spring 1982), 64-71.

new invention of gaslight, which irreversibly changed modern life, including the creation and display of art. Early gas jets were said to be between six and sixteen times as bright as candle flames and at least three times as bright as the finest oil lamps. Little wonder that artists seized upon gas lighting in their studios and exhibition halls. Using his advanced knowledge of light and optics, Church devised strategies to draw upon their expressive potential and intensify audiences' experiences of his fictive landscapes.

This chapter focuses on the lighting and optical devices that were employed to enhance the illusion that *Heart of the Andes* transported the viewer to South America. Deploying written commentaries by actress and author Fanny Kemble, humorist Mark Twain and bestselling novelist Augusta Evans, we attempt to unravel the magic of Church's techniques for illuminating his big picture. When the painting was shown at New York's Tenth Street building, large crowds lined up to see it. The room was decorated with palm fronds and tropical birds to set the mood. Attendants sold explanatory pamphlets that clarified the details of the picture.

As advertised, the painting was on view from 8am to 5pm, when it could be seen by natural light. But it was also open at night, from 7pm to 10pm. During those evening hours, the picture was made to suffer 'torture by gaslight,' with batteries of burners equivalent to fifteen-watt light bulbs. These had to be kept far enough from the painting so as not to burn it but, from a safe distance, lent it only a sickly yellow cast. As *Heart of the Andes* proceeded on its ten-city tour, Church and his agents further finessed the exhibition apparatus and especially the lighting strategies to enhance the viewer's illusion that she was transported to South America.³

By 1859 gas lighting was transforming the urban landscape. To understand the impact that Church's picture made on its spectators, it is helpful to track the contrasts they encountered as they passed through the streets of lower Manhattan into the gallery. Public gas lighting first appeared in the US in 1817, when the Gas Light Company of Baltimore lit a burner at one of the city's major intersections. The southernmost section of New York's Broadway was first lit with gas streetlamps in

3 Kevin Avery, *Church's Great Picture: The Heart of the Andes* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1993), p. 36.

1827, initiating its reputation as the city that never sleeps. Other streets followed, while oil-lit blocks — which continued to outnumber those lit using gas until after midcentury — appeared dark in contrast. Novelist George Lippard wrote in 1854 of side streets ‘dark as grave vaults’ in lower Manhattan, while Broadway was ‘defined by two lines of light, which, in the far distance melt into one vague mass of brightness.’⁴ New Yorkers heading for a viewing of *Heart of the Andes* would have traversed prosperous commercial streets and affluent residential neighborhoods glowing with light as well as less traveled side streets shrouded in darkness as they made their way to 51 West Tenth St., between Fifth and Sixth Avenue. The sky overhead, once black and starry, by the 1850s took on a faint reddish glow. Enjoying the freedom to walk the streets of the nocturnal city thanks to these recent advances in lighting, Church’s visitors were primed to be dazzled by the prospect of surveying his painting after dark.

Since Church’s earlier blockbuster *Niagara* (1857; National Gallery of Art) had previously been on tour, he and his agents had gained some insight into this process. Their decision to bypass the annual exhibitions of the National Academy of Design and instead hire a private space for display was predicated partly on the fact that this gave them the ability to control and manipulate the viewing conditions. But beyond that, it allowed them to create an inviting environment that enhanced the fiction of viewing the scenery first-hand. A frequent visitor to the Paris Salon, artist and writer Zacharie Astruc found that the official exhibition became more unpleasant every year, and likened it to a ‘frames fair’ and a ‘Capernaum.’ As an alternative he encouraged his readers to go to the private galleries on Boulevard des Italiens to see ‘the new exhibition of modern painting’ which he described as an ‘intimate salon with a quiet atmosphere and excellent viewing conditions.’ The experience was enhanced by a new kind of lampshade, which illuminated the painting without creating any glare for the viewer.⁵

4 Quoted in Peter C. Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night: Life in the Nocturnal City, 1820–1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago University Press, 2015), p. 16.

5 Véronique Chagnon-Burke, ‘Rue Laffitte: Looking at and Buying Art in Mid-Nineteenth Century Paris’, *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide* 11.2 (2012), 31-54, <https://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/summer12/veronique-chagnon-burke-looking-at-and-buying-contemporary-art-in-mid-nineteenth-century-paris>



Fig. 10.2 Frederic Church, *Niagara*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1857. Wikimedia. Public domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Niagara_by_Frederic_Edwin_Church,_1857_-_Corcoran_Gallery_of_Art_-_DSC01135.JPG

By the late 1850s a growing number of commercial art galleries showed artworks in their windows. In Paris, poet and art critic Théophile Gautier described their illuminated displays:

The rue Laffitte is like a permanent Salon, an exhibition of paintings that lasts the whole year round. Five or six shops offer in their windows a constantly changing selection of paintings, which are illuminated by powerful reflectors.⁶

Competing with the annual government-sponsored Salon, commercial galleries drew upon the latest strategies, including methods of display used in the increasingly popular department stores. Living and maintaining a studio in New York City, Church would have observed parallel displays in A. T. Stewart's Dry Goods Store — also known as the Marble Palace — at 280 Broadway. Featuring fashion shows, sales, large display windows and the latest in lighting, it could well have inspired display and marketing strategies employed by Church, who was known to acquire goods from Stewart's. Some visitors applauded the external effects Church deployed while others felt that they detracted from the experience, as our survey of responses to his great painting reveals.

⁶ Théophile Gautier, 'La Rue Laffitte', *L'Artiste*, 7th ser., 13.1 (January 3, 1858), 10–13, quoted in and translated by Chagnon-Burke, 'Rue Laffitte: Looking at and Buying Art in Mid-Nineteenth Century Paris'.

The distinguished British-born actress and writer Fanny Kemble married the American plantation owner Pierce Mease Butler. After their divorce she continued to travel back and forth between Britain and America, and served as a conduit between the two cultural scenes, which she documented in correspondence and memoirs. In her letters to British artist Lord Leighton, Kemble kept him abreast of art doings in the United States, where he sometimes sent work. From Boston in 1861 she wrote:

... here people exhibit their pictures at a shilling a head, i.e. put them in a room hung round with black calico, light up a flare of gas above them, and take a quarter of a dollar from every sinner who sees them. Two of Church's pictures (he is a great American artist, though you may never have heard of him) have been, or rather are, at this moment so exhibiting — his Falls of Niagara, and a very beautiful landscape called the Heart of the Andes. Both these pictures were exhibited in London, I know not with what success; they have both considerable merit, but the latter I admire extremely. Page had a Venus here the other day, exhibited by gas-light in a black room.

She concludes:

... indeed, my dear Mr. Leighton, it seems to me as if you never could imagine or would consent to the gross charlatanry which is practiced — how necessarily I do not know — here about all such matters.⁷

While Kemble admits that she greatly admires *Heart of the Andes*, she obviously feels that she has been somewhat taken in by what she calls 'gross charlatanry', an accusation that is underpinned by negative ideas about the relationship between fine arts and popular stage productions.

Since we have no images of the paintings lit by gaslight, images of contemporary theaters with a scenic backdrop illuminated by a row of gaslights placed along the foot of the stage help us to conceive the effect. Theater design and technology changed around the mid-nineteenth century. Candlelit stages were replaced with gaslight and limelight. Limelight consisted of a block of lime heated to incandescence by means of an oxyhydrogen flame torch. The light could then be focused with mirrors and produced quite a powerful light. Theater interiors also

7 Kemble quoted in Malcolm Goldstein, *Landscape with Figures: A History of Art Dealing in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 44. My thanks to Patricia Wadsley for her help with this source.

began improving in the 1850s, with ornate decoration and stall seating replacing the pit. Contemporary accounts mention Church and his wife attending theater and opera, where he studied the dramatic lighting effects that were closest in spirit his own pictorial displays.

Notwithstanding the improvements it brought to the theatre, as the use of gaslight became more widespread and it was employed to illuminate art, it was increasingly equated with deception and charlatanry. Two examples among Church's contemporaries suffice. First, a law was passed in New York forbidding the sale of art by gaslight:

The latest example of Mr. Abram Hewitt's earnest desire to earn his salt as Mayor of the City of New York, is his revival of an old municipal ordinance, which forbids the sale of pictures by gaslight. He has notified all the art auctioneers of New York that they will no longer be allowed to hold picture sales by gaslight. This, of course, puts an end to evening picture sales, and seriously injures the New York picture trade. The law was passed many years ago, when most of the pictures sold at auction in New York were of the 'shangae' order, and it was designed to protect the public from the wiles of sharpers.⁸

The second involved the maligning of Albert Bierstadt, Church's colleague and painter of the West:

... in an evil moment, the showman got hold of him, and it was found profitable to carry his large canvases around the county, fit them up with a frame of curtains, illuminate them by artificial light, and exhibit them to awestruck audiences at twenty-five cents a head. To paint with the object of astonishing uncultivated people, with the aid of glaring lights and theatrical accessories would spoil the greatest artist that ever lived, and, even if it did not spoil the artist, it would ruin his reputation among people of discrimination, so that it is not surprising... that a suspicion of charlatanism fell upon him... This manner of viewing fine-art was, in that day at least, peculiarly profitable; and before advancing public taste had fully decided to disapprove of the theatrical display of pictures, he was able to console himself with a considerable fortune.⁹

The artist walked a tightrope between highbrow and lowbrow, between the desire to provide his visitors with thrilling effects and to maintain the decorum of a professional artist.

8 'Monthly Record of American Art', *The Magazine of Art*, 10 (1887), xlv.

9 'Death of Albert Bierstadt, Landscape-Painter', *The American Architect and Building News*, 75 (8 March 1902), 74.

As a writer who struggled with this same highbrow/lowbrow divide, Samuel Clemens was perfectly positioned to understand Church's great picture. Clemens first saw it in St. Louis in March 1861 and described it to his brother:

I have just returned from a visit to the most wonderfully beautiful painting which this city has ever seen — Church's Heart of the Andes — which represents a lovely valley with its rich vegetation in all the bloom and glory of a tropical summer...¹⁰

He continues, providing some specifics of the viewing experience:

We took the opera glass and examined its beauties minutely, for the naked eye cannot discern the little wayside flowers, and soft shadows and patches of sunshine, and half-hidden bunches of grass and jets of water which form some of its most enchanting features.¹¹

His words situate *Heart of the Andes* in the realm of popular entertainment, and especially alongside the panoramas that had been common during the preceding decades. These were large-scale pictures that provided audiences with a grand, sweeping view of far away places that — upon closer inspection — were built up from on-the-spot observation of near detail. Surviving images of J. L. Daguerre's diorama convey something of the physical viewing experience: the seated audience looks to the stage where an extended image is unrolled frame by frame before their eyes, conveying everything from the eruption of Pompeii to the wonders of an archaeological tour. 'I was at the private view of the Diorama,' British artist John Constable wrote; 'it is in part a transparency; the spectator is in a dark chamber, and it is very pleasing, and has great illusion.'¹²

Clemens' own rhapsodic description continues:

There is no slurring of perspective effect about it — the most distant — the minutest object in it has a marked and distinct personality — so that you may count the very leaves on the trees...¹³

10 Samuel L. Clemens to Orion Clemens, 18 March 1861; rept. in Edgar Marquess Branch *et. al.* (eds.), *Mark Twain's Letters Volume 1: 1853–1866* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 117.

11 *Ibid.*

12 John Constable, Letter to a Friend, quoted without full citation in Bernard Comment, *The Panorama* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), p. 59.

13 Samuel L. Clemens to Orion Clemens, 18 March 1861, p. 117.

You cannot ‘understand’, he concludes, ‘how such a miracle could have been conceived and executed by human brain and human hands.’¹⁴

Unlike others who wrote as if they were taken in by these manipulations, Clemens acknowledges that the artist’s ‘human brain and human hands’ maneuvered the entire extravaganza. But he enjoys the deception. What goes unmentioned by Clemens, but what was alluded to by Constable and was common to panorama shows, was the use and variety of lighting effects. Daguerre and others painted their dioramas on a translucent screen, illuminated from behind by candles or gaslight (Constable’s ‘transparencies’). Natural phenomena like fires and volcanic eruptions would be shown in reddish-yellow light, lightning in white light. As a young man Church had helped create a panorama of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, so we know he was familiar with this genre of popular imagery.¹⁵ This too would have informed his creation of *Heart of the Andes* and its unconventional use of lighting effects for display.

In 1866 Augusta Evans published *St. Elmo*, which became one of the most popular novels of the Civil War era. Chapter 28 of this bestseller is set in a New York gallery, where a thirteen year old boy named Felix describes his reaction upon encountering *Heart of the Andes*:

Oh! How grand and beautiful it is! Whenever I look at it, I feel exactly as I did on Easter-Sunday when I went to the cathedral to hear the music. It is a solemn feeling, as if I were in a holy place.¹⁶

A visual corollary to this description is found in the magnificent interior of the Spanish Colonial Church of San Francisco that the artist visited in 1853 and 1857 while in Quito, Ecuador, the country that inspired *Heart of the Andes*. Felix’s words echo the artist’s reaction entering the church — set against the backdrop of the Andes Mountains — and beholding the gilded altar glistening as the rays of the equatorial sun struck it through the open door. Church would undoubtedly have been in awe of the sight, unmatched by anything he had seen before.

14 Ibid.

15 See John K. Howat, *Frederic Church* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 19–20 on *Pilgrim’s Progress*; this book provides the most accessible biography of Church.

16 Augusta Jane Evans, *St. Elmo: A Novel* (New York: Carleton, 1867), p. 356, available as an ebook: <https://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/evans/evans.html>. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given in brackets.

Referencing 'Easter,' 'the Cathedral' and 'a holy place,' Felix conjures up a choir singing, incense burning, and the subdued light of a church interior. In its soaring interior, burning candles illuminate discrete areas, which are reflected off the gold surfaces of the altar treasures to create a mysterious and awe-inspiring atmosphere. Light is simultaneously natural and divine. How, the orphaned boy then queries his governess, does the large canvas have the power to make him feel this way? Edna Earl responds:

You are impressed by the solemnity and the holy repose of nature; for here you look upon a pictured cathedral, built not by mortal hands, but by the architect of the universe. Felix, does it not recall to your mind something of which we often speak?

'The boy was silent for a few seconds, and then his thin, sallow face brightened.'

Yes, indeed! [he cried] You mean that splendid description which you read to me from *Modern Painters*? How fond you are of that passage, and how very often you think of it! Let me see whether I can remember it.

Slowly but accurately he repeated the eloquent tribute to Mountain Glory, from the fourth volume of [John Ruskin's] *Modern Painters*[...].

'Last week you asked me to explain to you what is meant by 'aerial perspective,' Miss Earl resumed, 'and if you will study the atmosphere in this great picture, Mr. Church will explain it much more clearly to you than I was able to do.'

Yes, Miss Earl, I see it now. The eye could travel up and up, and on and on, and never get out of the sky; and it seems to me those birds yonder would fly entirely away, out of sight, through the air in the picture. But, Miss Earl, do you really believe that the Chimborazo in South America is as grand as Mr. Church's? I do not, because I have noticed that pictures are much handsomer than the real things they stand for. (pp. 356–57)

Felix suggests that one cause of this effect is 'the far-off look that everything wears when painted.' Quoting the poet Thomas Campbell, Miss Earl agrees: 'distance lends enchantment to the view.' (p. 357)

It is helpful to review a photograph of Church's *Heart of the Andes* as it was displayed at the Metropolitan Fair in 1864 as we consider this exchange. Like all realistic landscapes, Church has employed aerial perspective to convey a sense of recession into space on the two-dimensional surface. But the surface of *Heart of the Andes* is quite large — 5 x 10 feet — and requires the viewer to stand a substantial distance away from it to get the full effect. Yet, in the crowded galleries audiences were pushed close to the picture, held back from touching it

only by the railing visible in the 1864 photograph. So other means were necessary to convey this 'far-off look:' Church employed his substantial knowledge of light and optics to lift his viewers out of their own reality, and transport them to the pictured Andes of South America.

The dialogue between Evans's characters goes on for several pages before winding down: 'Perfect beauty in scenery is like the mirage that you read about yesterday,' the governess tells the young boy, 'it fades and flits out of your grasp, as you travel towards it.' (p. 358) They acknowledge the artifice that space and lighting helped to create, and yet they take great pleasure in its illusion.

Miss Earl, Felix and his baby sister leave the gallery and head home. At about 5pm the governess goes on a carriage ride with her gentleman friend, Mr. St. Elmo. The text reads: 'They dashed on, and the sunlight disappeared, and the gas glittered all over the city.' [p. 362] The chapter has come full circle, from the impressive effects of Church's canvas to the artificial illumination of the city streets. Augusta Evans leaves little doubt that Church's light was the more dazzling.

In 1864 *Heart of the Andes* was shown at the Sanitary Fair; it was one among hundreds of artworks, American and foreign. Like Bierstadt's *Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, it was exhibited without special effects. 'Neither of them looks so well here as when seen by them themselves and surrounded by all the appliances of the skillful picture-hanger,' the *New York Times* reported. But what did he really mean, given that Church opted for the specially designed frame resembling a windowpane over which hung portraits of Presidents Washington, Jefferson, and Adams? Surely these could be considered the added apparatus? What the reporter obviously missed was the darkened room with the single picture, dramatically lit.

In those few years between 1859 and 1861, curtains, props and especially lighting ensured that those who had paid their twenty-five cents to see the legendary picture would never forget the experience. But in the end those special effects complemented the canvas itself. For the artist orchestrated his own internal light in the painting, including this sunbeam he added to illuminate his signature carved into the bark of the tree at the left of the picture. A testament to Church's success, Mark Twain said it best: 'Your third visit will find your brain gasping and straining with futile efforts to take all the wonder in.'¹⁷

17 Samuel L. Clemens to Orion Clemens, p. 117.

