

Frederic Church
The Art and Science of Detail
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Jacket illustrations: (front) Frederic Edwin Church, *The Heart of the Andes*, 1850 (detail of [fig. 22](#)); (back) Frederic Edwin Church, *Floating Iceberg*, 1859 ([fig. 38](#))

Frontispiece: Frederic Edwin Church, *The Icebergs*, 1861 (detail of [fig. 39](#))

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Seeing in Detail

“WHY DO PRECISELY these objects which we behold make a world?”¹ Henry David Thoreau asks this question in *Walden* while observing the landscape around his cabin in the woods. The attempt to reconcile part and whole, the visible and the vast, is also the key issue for Thoreau’s contemporary, the landscape painter Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900). Both men struggled to integrate science and belief, the minutiae of observable nature and the immensity of God’s nature. In August 1851, three years before the publication of *Walden*, Thoreau wrote in his journal, “I fear that the character of my knowledge is from year to year becoming more distinct & scientific—That in exchange for views as wide as heaven’s cope I am being narrowed down to the field of the microscope—I see details not wholes nor the shadow of the whole. I count some parts, & say ‘I know.’”² Frederic Church’s works reveal the difficulty, or even impossibility, of both seeing “precisely these objects” and saying “I know.”

Nineteenth-century viewers expected landscape paintings to balance precision and generality, detail and effect, but Church’s works often seemed to upset this balance, especially as his career progressed. While *The Andes of Ecuador* (1855; see [fig. 16](#)) encompasses its details under the sun’s celestial light and *Niagara* (1857; see [fig. 2](#)) marshals its elements toward a unified effect, *The Heart of the Andes* (1859; see [fig. 22](#)) dizzies with a proliferation of botanical specimens. Later paintings seem to withhold narrative details: *The Icebergs* (1861; see [fig. 39](#)) unsettles with its arctic desolation, and *Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica* (1867; see [fig. 58](#)) sets the stage for allegory but spotlights emptiness. One of Church’s last major works, *El Khasné, Petra* (1874; see [fig. 72](#)), depicts a site in the Holy Land but blocks the expected signs of spiritual transcendence. As his success waned in the 1870s, Church switched media: he designed Olana, his house and 250 acres of picturesque grounds on the Hudson River (see [figs. 86–92](#)). “I can make more and better landscapes in this way than by tampering with canvas and paint,” he wrote to a friend.³ Olana represents both a retreat from the world and an attempt to create a new one.

The artist’s works elicited celebratory, as well as conflicted, responses at mid-century. Did Church’s scientific proclivities, his “avidity to gather new and strange facts,” disrupt his ability to offer a broader, allegorical message?⁴ “Study the foreground of a Church,” one critic wrote, reflecting on the artist’s career shortly after his death in 1900, “and you will find a constant struggle between the desire to say everything and to say also the large and appealing thing.”⁵ Such a “struggle,” in Church’s paintings and also in critical responses to them, raises questions about the role of detail in a work of art during the nineteenth century.

Church’s paintings visualize and historicize a fundamental shift in representation, one that is part of a broader epistemological transition from knowledge to information during this period. While the term “knowledge” implied the pursuit of a unifying structure in the nineteenth century, “information”—a word more commonly used as the century progressed—made no such promises.⁶ A system of representation based on the containment of details became marked instead by discontinuity and difference. Like Thoreau’s writing, Church’s landscapes are poised between these paradigms. While embracing the microscopic, both writer and painter find that such details do not necessarily “make a world.” Frederic Church’s landscapes compellingly represent the problems and possibilities of seeing and knowing in a culture of detail.

I began with a simple question. Standing in front of *The Heart of the Andes* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I wondered, why is this painting so detailed? This was the first word that came to mind when looking at the picture. It was also the term—as adjective or noun—that I overheard again and again in the Met’s gallery: exclamations over the “detailed” canvas; exhortations to fellow viewers to look at the “details.” These are the terms that, without fail, appeared in criticism from the period as well as in more recent scholarship about the artist. And yet for all its ubiquity, there was no account of what detail might mean. How does it work in *The Heart of the Andes* and in other paintings by Church? How was it defined in the nineteenth century? And, to return to the viewing experience itself, what does it mean to see a work of art “in detail,” to use yet another version of the word? Lastly, I wondered how writing about seeing in detail might take form.

What should be immediately clear, and even troubling, is how quickly that “simple” question becomes complicated. “Detail,” “detailed,” “in detail”—the terms may have the same root, but they can be defined quite differently. When we refer to “a detail” we usually mean a specific part of a whole; “detailed” describes the overall impression of this specificity; “in detail” connotes the act of looking at these parts. The point here is not an exercise in semantics but rather an attempt to acknowledge, right away, how the different forms of a single term shift from the marking of spatial and material borders (a piece, a whole), to a description of the visual field within those borders, to the visual process itself. Finally, “detail”—used without an article—can signify the concept more broadly, potentially engaging all of the other meanings of the term. I move between these uses, but in many ways this book is most about “seeing in detail”—to rewrite a phrase borrowed from Naomi Schor, whose *Reading in Detail* was essential to this project.⁷ How we look at an object produces how an object looks. Seeing precedes describing. “The detail,” states Georges Didi-Huberman, another author on whom I rely for a theorization of the concept, “poses one question above all others: *where to look from?*”⁸ With detail, “stable conceptual meaning seems to slip from our grasp,” writes Daniel Arasse in *Le détail: Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*, the only book that takes as its focus the problem of detail in works of art. “But it is also this condensation of different meanings that makes the term effective for understanding the rich complexity of relationships that are at play in front of and within the painting.”⁹

How can one begin to define a detail “within” a work of art, and how is this related to the viewer’s experience “in front of” that work? A detail can be considered as a semiotic “unit” of visual language. It is, by nature, contradictory; it can delineate difference or emphasize unity. As defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, detail connotes an “attention to particulars.” It is, in relation to art, “a minute or subordinate part of a building, sculpture, or painting, *as distinct* from the larger portions or the general conception.” Yet details are also “the particulars or items of any whole considered *collectively*.”¹⁰ A detail contributes to a whole while remaining distinct from it. In a sense, the detail always points away from itself to something else—to other parts of a picture, to the work of art as a whole. Perhaps we cannot even see what the detail gestures to. This point is best expressed by considering image reproduction in the discipline of art history. When a work of art is cropped and reproduced as a “detail” (as always indicated in a caption), we understand this in two ways: here is a piece, perhaps even magnified, of something larger and, secondly, what we see here is not everything—the detail signifies that there is much that we are *not* seeing. It draws us in to a privileged space of specificity while simultaneously indicating a visual realm that is beyond its borders. This is the detail as a cut, following its etymological root from the French *détailler*, from *tailler*, meaning “to cut.”

For the nineteenth-century American viewer, details in a landscape painting did a certain pictorial work. They were understood to be small in scale and visually compelling, leading the eye into the foreground and becoming the first points of contact with the spectator. They were associated with the

minute, the particular, and the microscopic, and were juxtaposed against a notion often described as “effect,” which was equated with generality, union, and harmony, even a sense of the sublime.— “Effect,” in the period, was not simply a noun waiting to be shaped by an adjective (as in the “detailed effect” that I have just discussed), but rather an idea in and of itself, one indicative of the eventual unification of those foreground details and the suppression of their difference. The aim in landscape painting was, in fact, to avoid a “detailed effect” while providing an “effect” in which details were forgotten (one might even say repressed) and only a singular impression of harmony remained. The seventeenth-century canvases of Claude Lorrain still provided the basis for conceptualizing and critiquing a landscape composition: a tripartite structure consisting of a darkened but detailed foreground, a strongly lit middle distance, and a background of warm, inviting light.¹¹ Trees in the foreground, or another type of *repoussoir* object, frame the scene and push the eye into deeper space. Such a visual course had a conceptual correspondence: the small and specific aspects of nature or narrative should yield to a greater wholeness inherent in the natural world and reflective of the divine. “The details, the prose of nature he should omit,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay “Art” (1841), referring to the landscape painter, and thus a work of art should “give us only the spirit and splendor.”¹² Even with such “prose” present, most critics and viewers expected landscape paintings to provoke higher associations. Thus the pictorial detail had a specific cultural, even religious, obligation: to move the eye from the minute elements of nature to a larger idea of Nature with all its attendant associations with unity and divinity.

Church’s paintings presented a challenge to this structure, a challenge that was part of a wider critical debate during the mid- to late nineteenth century in the United States.¹³ If natural details could distinguish landscape painting as a genre, they could also threaten to overwhelm “Nature” as an idea or allegory. Church’s canvases often seemed to be more invested in the “distinct and scientific” as a model of representation, a model that raised issues of mimesis and reproduction that I will particularly address in [chapter 1](#). In his *Book of the Artists* (1867), Henry Tuckerman noted that Church “goes to nature, not so much with the tenderness of a lover or the awe of a worshipper, as with the determination, the intelligence, the patient intrepidity of a student; he is keenly on the watch for facts, and resolute in their transfer to art.”¹⁴ G. W. Sheldon, the author of *American Painters*, lamented that Church’s pictures neglected “the higher and spiritual verities of Nature” that had traditionally defined landscape painting. Although the artist’s works were all “well known” and “exceedingly popular,” Sheldon pointed to the elaboration of detail as their clear fault: “It is scarcely necessary to stop here and explain what their principal defect is, because, by this time, that defect must have been recognized by almost every intelligent American lover of art. It consists in the elaboration of details at the expense of the unity and force of sentiment.” Writing in 1881, Sheldon assumes that his readers, “by this time,” already understand this.¹⁵

As Thoreau’s journal entry reveals, a tension was emerging at mid-century between “the field of the microscope” and an expansive vision from above—those “views as wide as heaven’s cope.” While the whole connotes a spiritual harmony, the detail becomes a synonym for the scientific. This is a critical new way of conceiving of detail, one that Church’s works, and especially *The Heart of the Andes*, engages. His paintings increasingly privilege a scientific realism over allegorical structure. Paint is still conceived of in a traditional manner, as a means to represent the world, rather than to replicate optical experience. Paint is meant to be forgotten, a mere mediator between icon and index, between thought and thing. This could be juxtaposed with the work of Church’s contemporary George Inness who—according to Rachael DeLue’s account—“enjoined the beholder to simultaneously forget and feel his pictures, to be in them, dreamily but to constantly bump up against their strange and disfigured motifs.” Central to her reconsideration of the painter is the “disfiguration” of landscape

conventions and even the surface of the canvas itself.¹⁶ If Inness creates a disruptive viewing experience by calling attention to the painted surface, Church does so through an elaboration of detail, a kind of excess of realism.¹⁷ Each detail, each identifiable part of the landscape, refuses to dissolve into paint or effect.

Detail can be approached in pictorial, cultural, and scientific terms. I also understand it as an aspect of, or a challenge to, narrative.¹⁸ In what ways do Church's paintings move our eyes through the canvas to create a story? How do details contribute to or undermine the story's intelligibility? How does a picture suggest what is significant and what is insignificant in such a narrative, and what are the cultural norms that define the very ideas of "significance" and "insignificance"? Such questions will be particularly important to the discussion of *The Heart of the Andes* and *The Icebergs* in chapters 3 and 4. Too many "underplots" could threaten to "overpower the main story" of a landscape painting, one critic claimed, "*but story there must be, or we have no landscape.*"¹⁹

I have found Alex Woloch's arguments about the destabilizing effect of minor characters—"too many people" creating a "thickness of narrative"—in realist novels very useful in thinking through these questions. Such novels, similar to Church's paintings, propose an "empiricist aesthetic" that maps a "tension between integration and excess." While Woloch does not directly contend with the "detail," he does state, in a two-page footnote, that it is "central to discussions of realism because it bears directly on the tensions between totality and particularity, or metaphor and facticity." He also links this tension to problems of social inclusion.²⁰ While this issue is not central to my project, the detail does assume class connotations in period criticism and thus invites the appropriation—or rejection—of works of art based on such designations. It is Baudelaire, in "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), who best expresses a fear of the tyranny of details. "An artist with a perfect sense of form but one accustomed to relying above all on his memory and his imagination will find himself at the mercy of a riot of details all clamoring for justice with the fury of a mob in love with absolute equality. All justice is trampled under foot; all harmony sacrificed and destroyed; many a trifle assumes vast proportions; many a triviality usurps the attention. The more our artist turns an impartial eye on detail, the greater is the state of anarchy."²¹ For Baudelaire, the problem is one of "seeing all." Unity is destroyed; pictorial and narrative (and social) hierarchy vanishes; anarchy ensues.

Approaching detail through these categories—pictorial, cultural, scientific, narrative—enables a more precise material and theoretical consideration. My sense of detail has been shaped by the work of Naomi Schor and Daniel Arasse.²² Schor summarizes the reception of detail at the beginning of her book *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*: "As any historian of ideas knows, the detail has until very recently been viewed in the West with suspicion if not downright hostility." The "rise of the detail," she argues, is bound up with the decline of classicism and the birth of realism while being irreducible to that story. Her "feminist archaeology" of detail is argued through a deeply historical and textual analysis of works of literature and criticism. Although I disagree with her contention that detail is always gendered feminine, the story she tells and the way she tells it—the way she reads—has been crucial to the story I will try to tell.²³

If Schor's work has provided a way of reading, Arasse's work has provided a way of seeing. For Arasse, the art historian is always trying to pacify detail. "A detail is shocking," he writes.²⁴ "The status of detail is uncertain in painting because the detail disrupts."²⁵ To search for such "disruptions" is what interests Arasse, and while this can lead to a sense of the art historian as detective at times, the way in which he reads against the grain moves his analyses far from the normative preferences of iconography. While I am concerned with the nineteenth century, Arasse's text largely considers the shift in the ontological status of detail in the period from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century,

from a close and celebrated connection to mimesis in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with roots in classicism, to a desire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to control the “digressive”—capacity of details. Critics faulted the “accumulation of precise details” and advised viewers to avoid standing too close to paintings. Such “intimacy” is, for Arasse, essential to the task of art history. His “l’histoire de près”—also formulated as “l’histoire rapprochée”—is a method of close looking, one that, in fact, reveals the true impossibility of producing “a history of detail.”²⁶ “The detail is the moment that becomes an event in the picture, that lures the eye and disrupts its course. This diversion, although it may be fatal to ‘unity,’ although the picture risks coming apart and the eye losing its way, is also where the *plaisir* of the picture becomes the *jouissance* of painting.”²⁷ Pleasure becomes a key term—not something to be considered apart from or opposed to inquiry but as a force through which to see and interpret the unexpected.

Detail seems so elemental as to be easily taken for granted, and yet it eludes easy definition, demanding an attempt at classification that never seems entirely satisfactory. A compelling literary analogy might be the “Cetology” chapter of *Moby Dick* (1851)—a novel that can be read as an epic struggle with detail. Ishmael begins by proclaiming that “soon we shall be lost in [the sea’s] unshored harborless immensities,” where the Pequod will encounter that great leviathan. To prevent such a loss—of orientation and life, but also of narrative clarity and the very meaning of language—he attempts “the classification of the constituents of a chaos.” Cetology is then discussed at length.²⁸ “There is always the danger,” Naomi Schor cautions, “that to write *of* the detail is to become lost *in* it.”²⁹ Melville’s novel—its prose and structure—takes this risk, arguably making it the very theme of the book. *Moby Dick* was famously panned by critics, but a few praised the “wondrous elaborateness of detail” and “the immense amount of reliable information.”³⁰ “To a less gifted author,” another critic wrote, such apparent discursiveness “would inevitably have proved fatal. He has not only deftly avoided their dangers, but made them an element of great power.”³¹

The problematic status of detail shaped the critical and popular reception of art in nineteenth-century America. Frederic Church’s paintings provide the richest and most sustained engagement with this issue. His landscapes were also cultural phenomena. Born in 1826, the son of a wealthy Hartford, Connecticut, businessman, Frederic Church was the first pupil of Thomas Cole, whose works inaugurated a new style of American painting. Following this influential apprenticeship, Church set up his studio in New York City and quickly found success. At age twenty-two, he became one of the youngest artists ever elected as a full member of the prestigious National Academy of Design. But instead of sending his major canvases—works like *Niagara*, *The Heart of the Andes*, and *The Icebergs*—to the academy’s annual exhibition, he chose to display them alone, for an admission fee, attracting crowds of viewers as these “Great Pictures” toured the United States and crossed the Atlantic.³² Newspapers speculated on the painter’s studio production, reported on his wide-ranging travels, and reviewed his exhibitions. Frederic Church, as one modern critic has argued, was “the nation’s first artistic celebrity.”³³

Unlike many of his compatriots, Church did not go to Europe as a young man. He did not embark on the Grand Tour of European capitals or study in one of the esteemed academies. Instead, in 1853, when he was twenty-seven, the painter followed the path of scientists, journeying through Ecuador and Colombia for nearly seven months, inspired by the travels of the great German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, who had spent five years exploring South America from 1799 to 1804, as well as those of Charles Darwin, whose voyages on the *Beagle* (1831–36) were also indebted to Humboldt. Upon his return, Church painted his largest and most ambitious canvas to date, *The Andes of Ecuador* (1855). A critic for *Harper’s Weekly* praised the picture for its unified effect, by which “all detail, all shape

[was] lost in the vastness of the gorges.”³⁴ The success of *The Andes of Ecuador* would give Church aesthetic freedom—he would no longer have to rely solely on commissions or patrons and their specific demands. In 1857, he returned to the Andes for a shorter trip and two years later produced *The Heart of the Andes*, arguably the most famous painting in mid-nineteenth-century America. In the next decade he would travel to the Arctic, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and, finally, Europe. At the height of his fame, his paintings commanded record prices, and his exhibitions mustered long lines. But as the century continued, his success dwindled. Church’s own pupil, William James Stillman, would later fault his teacher for a blinding “love of facts and detail.”³⁵ The canvases were too scientific. “It is not enough that his ferns and climbers should be recognized by the tropical botanist,” Stillman declared.³⁶ Nature should be a metaphor for something larger than itself.

Details in Church’s paintings were often described as products of the artist’s “labor.” *Scientific American*, a weekly newspaper founded in 1846, praised *The Heart of the Andes* as a model of “study and labor, both in preparation and execution.”³⁷ In *The Art-Idea* (1864), the influential critic James Jackson Jarves faulted Church’s painting (and Albert Bierstadt’s *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak*) for their evident “labor-trail.”³⁸ George Inness abandoned his earlier more mimetic style of painting, having found by the 1870s that “elaborateness in detail, did not gain me meaning. A part carefully finished, my forces were exhausted. I could not sustain it everywhere.”³⁹ But Church seems to have found this mode of painting to be exhilarating and, for a time, so too did critics. As Eleanor Jones Harvey has argued, the question of “finish” was seen in both aesthetic and cultural terms during the period, becoming “a potent metaphor for the sophistication of America’s citizens as well as its art and “linked directly to the artist’s level of industry.”⁴⁰ The Reverend Louis Legrand Noble, in his pamphlet written to accompany *The Heart of the Andes* and sold at the painting’s exhibitions, described its mountains as “miracles of elemental labor” and its trees as “prodigies of labor.” In fact, in all the details Noble finds the evidence of industry: “This painted vale with its attending heights, has the tale of that labor written in the thousand lines, graved in the countless fissures, frescoed in the stains and dyes, cut in the keen edges, sculptured in the round masses. Everywhere you see the footprints and marks of the busy, toiling elements.”⁴¹ Noble constructs a metaphor of mixed media to discuss a work of oil on canvas. As materially evocative as this description is, Church’s paintings are on the whole, characterized by remarkably smooth surfaces, surfaces that efface such material “footprints and marks.” The visible building up of pigment is done sparingly and only in discrete (yet significant) moments; traces of brushwork, when apparent at all, tend to adopt representational value (for instance, as the striations of a rock or the peeling bark of a tree) rather than serving as self-reflexive indicators of the artistic process. What such references to labor in critical accounts indicate, I would argue, is the labor of *seeing* Church’s painting.

The purpose of this project is to understand the visual demands Church’s canvases make and the specific cultural context to which they respond and from which they emerge. As Albert Ten Eyck Gardner wrote in 1945 about *The Heart of the Andes* in one of the first modern reevaluations of the artist: “An examination of the painting today leads one to muse upon the possibility that there was something behind its popularity which is now completely lacking.”⁴² To look closely at these pictures is to ask what history may have erased or diminished.

Writing about Church’s later works in 1875, Henry James asserted that there was “nothing that is a better proof of the essential impotence of criticism, in the last resort, than Mr. Church’s pictures.”

One can’t say what one means about them; the common critical formulas are too inflexible. It would be the part of wisdom perhaps to attempt and to desire to say nothing; simply to leave them to their tranquil destiny, which is apparently very honorable and

comfortable. If you praise them very highly, you say more than you mean, if you ~~denounce them, if, in vulgar parlance, you sniffat them, you say less.~~ It is the kind of art which seems perpetually skirting the edge of something worse than itself, like a woman with a taste for florid ornaments who should dress herself in a way to make quiet people stare, and yet who should be really a very reputable person. As we looked at Mr. Church's velvety vistas and gem-like vegetation, at Goupil's, we felt honestly sorry that there was any necessity in this weary world for taking upon one's self to be a critic, for deeming it essential to a proper self-respect to be analytical. Why not accept this lovely tropic scene as a very pretty picture, and have done with it?⁴³

James resists engaging with Church's pictures, choosing instead to question the very efficacy of criticism in the face of such "lovely" works. The risk was too great. One might say too much, or not enough. He also proposes a yet more troubling aspect of detail: embarrassment. Here is detail, in 1875, as feminized ornamentation, as an excess that offends taste and puts morality into question, as what Naomi Schor has called "the refuse of aesthetic verisimilitude."⁴⁴ Church's works were dismissed with greater frequency during this period using related terms; they were judged to be theatrical, loud, decadent, too elaborate, or simply—merely—beautiful.

But James does not exactly dismiss Church. The novelist was all too aware of the risks of "excessive interpretation."⁴⁵ In his preface to the novella *In the Cage*, which Schor cites, James states "My central spirit, in the anecdote, is, for verisimilitude, I grant, too ardent a focus of divination; but without this excess the phenomena detailed would have lacked their principle of cohesion."⁴⁶ The author here defends his own use of detail, as "anecdote" and "divination." Such "excess"—which his sentence itself displays—is necessary, he claims, to achieve cohesion. James and Church share a commitment to detail in the name of "verisimilitude." Excess becomes a consequence of such a (realist) project while an "*anxious detailism*, preoccupied with ensuring its own legitimacy," characterizes the endeavor.⁴⁷

James's words about Church's paintings reveal an anxiety about the nature of detail and its threats to semantic and visual propriety. His review—or rather his protestations against the possibilities of interpretation—also points to a shift in opinion, one that would last for almost a century until Church's works began to be discovered and discussed again. These highly detailed landscapes came to represent, as the nineteenth century continued, "the kind of art which seems perpetually skirting the edge of something worse than itself." Such pictures became identified as "popular" art, in the negative sense. Viewers might loudly proclaim their delight, but critics grew more suspicious of a "melodramatic effect"⁴⁸ or "Arabian Nights' Entertainment" that would be "the favorite with a large class."⁴⁹ Crowded galleries could signify "low" art; excessive detail might be a sign of aesthetic vulgarity. Church's canvases began to be viewed with a sense of embarrassment, even disgust. By the turn of the century, the artist was largely ignored, as if it were best to say nothing.⁵⁰

Church's works have been most canonically interpreted in terms of national identity; my aim is to foreground the visual and epistemological rather than the political or ideological. This is not to claim that these paintings do not engage with the latter terms in significant and complex ways. Rather, it is to worry about the limitations that an ideological model can pose. "To say that landscape painting is fundamentally or essentially an expression of ideology," Michael Gaudio warns, "runs the risk of losing the landscape itself."⁵¹ The narrative often invoked to explain Church's paintings frames them as expressions of New World ambitions and democratic optimism. This is the argument made by David Huntington, who almost single-handedly resurrected the artist's reputation with his 1960 Yale

dissertation and his successful efforts to preserve Olana. Huntington characterizes the artist's "great landscapes" as "the very icons of Manifest Destiny. . . . Any major 'Church' can be interpreted accordingly, even one of an Old World subject."⁵² The paintings' nationalist rhetoric and democratic intelligibility have remained the fundamental assumptions for all subsequent monographs, including those by Franklin Kelly, Gerald Carr, and John Howat.⁵³ Barbara Novak, John Wilmerding, Kevin Avery, Eleanor Jones Harvey, and Katherine Manthorne have also done particularly foundational work on the artist.⁵⁴ I am deeply indebted to all of these scholars, even when departing from some of their claims.

In her reconceptualization of nineteenth-century landscape paintings as a complex part of nation building, Angela Miller argues that Church's pictures display a "synecdochic nationalism" where part stands for whole and the local becomes the national. This is, in many ways, an argument about detail and effect, and served as an essential prompt to my own inquiry.⁵⁵ John Davis and Bryan Wolf have each offered models for the sustained, critical attention to individual works by Church while multi-author texts such as *Landscape and Power* and *Landscape Theory* have provided important paradigm through which to consider the broader conceptual stakes.⁵⁶ Following W. J. T. Mitchell, I consider landscape not as a "genre" but as a "medium," and as the most powerful visual mode of expression in nineteenth-century America.⁵⁷ The concept of medium offers a connection to artistic practice, to the natural world, to materials used and spaces transformed.

Barbara Novak memorably described Frederic Church as "the grand synthesizer" in her pioneering book *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (1980). "His art can be seen only in terms of sublime unities," she concludes. But more than any other scholar of American landscape painting, she is attentive to the problem of detail in nineteenth-century aesthetics.⁵⁸ The cover image for her 1971 article for *Art in America*, "Grand Opera and the Small Still Voice," reflects these considerations visually (and likely unintentionally) through a detail of dense tropical plants and deep shadows from *The Heart of the Andes* (fig. 1). The eye is drawn in, discovering more details, each smaller and more precise. This is not an image of the "sublime unities" and operatic light that Novak ultimately associates with Church's canvases, and she does briefly consider a more complicated visual model at work in his paintings: a "fundamental dialectic" between detail and whole. She compares this to Jackson Pollock, "whose work raises somewhat similar questions of detail, effect and ambition," before dropping an even more provocative comparison into parentheses. "(Indeed Abstract Expressionism in its flirtation with the idea of a grand style—in which the idea of abstraction is now substituted for the idea of nature—is the locus of a similar struggle between indigenous ambitions and European conventions.)"⁵⁹ Her parenthetical statement, a first and last thought on the issue, appears like Church's detail on the cover: striking, expansive, and incomplete.

I will not be arguing for explicit linkages between Church and Pollock, or for Church as a modernist or a proto-abstractionist. But I am invested in pursuing those "questions of detail, effect and ambition" as well as that "struggle" to which Novak refers. These are vital issues, and I believe that Church's landscapes provide the most compelling means to explore them, precisely because the paintings constantly invite us to offer both parenthetical "flirtations" and "grand" conclusions.

For Thomas Cole, a landscape painting should be the result of time "draw[ing] a veil over the common details, the unessential parts" that the artist encountered in the natural world.⁶⁰ Perceptual experience is here, as Angela Miller argues, "disciplined into a language of meaning that was communally shared."⁶¹ Cole's landscapes deliver an allegorical message: nature is the stage upon which man acts and God judges. But Church dismantles this stage; his details are more botanical than biblical, more subjective than symbolic. His paintings suggest a representational shift that finds

expression in literature from the period as well. Carol Christ sees a similar shift in Victorian poets as they depart from their Romantic predecessors. Poets like Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, and Gerard Manley Hopkins—all Church’s contemporaries—contend with “the problem of transcending the particular.” By the Victorian period, Christ argues, “the sense of the particularity of experience and the disintegration of belief in the reality of universals had increased to such an extent that poets were forced to develop new aesthetics to deal with this particularity and its relationship to art’s universality.” These artists were attempting to communicate a sense of universal order, but they do this through a focus on particularity—“the finer optic.”⁶² It is also at mid-century when, as Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have argued, the modern sense of objectivity arose. An “unprejudiced blind sight” became the privileged mode of scientific vision, producing images not of idealized forms but of “asymmetrical individuality.”⁶³

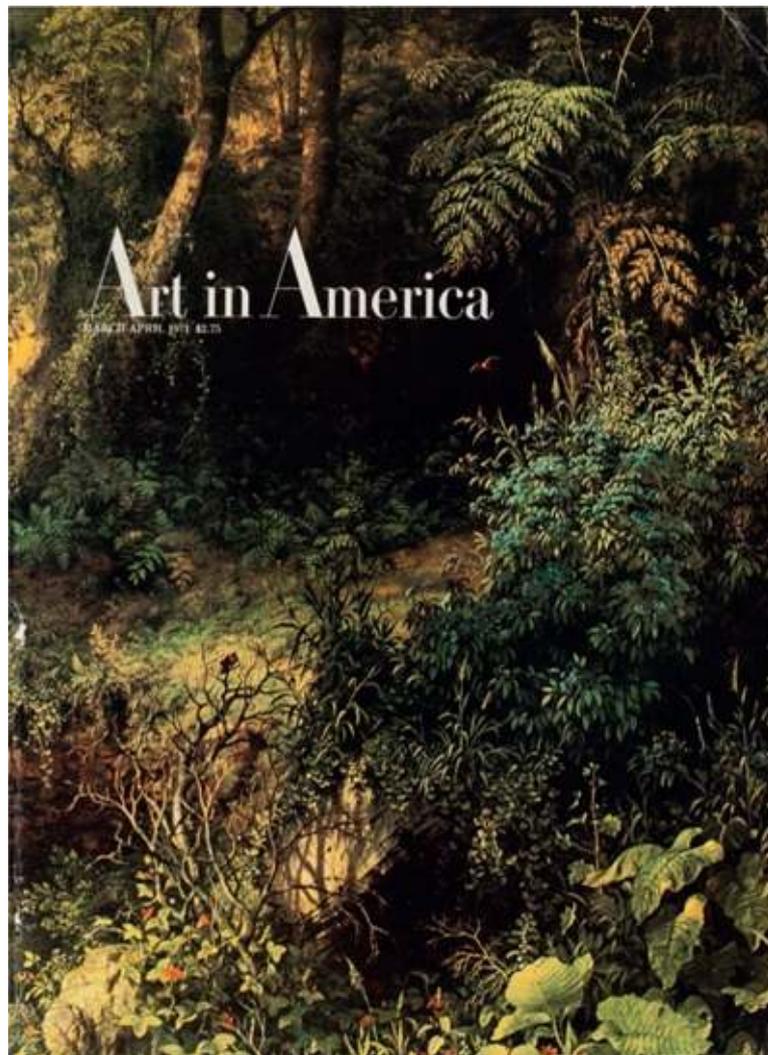


FIGURE 1 Originally published in *Art in America*, March–April 1971, cover. Courtesy BMP Media Holdings, LLC.

I will be discussing what I call “a culture of detail.” This notion emerged from Church’s paintings and led me to consider the dialectic between knowledge and information within this culture. Thomas Richards’s book *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* provided an excellent model. Richards traces the epistemological shift in Victorian culture from an assumption of the “superintending unity of knowledge”—the belief that “all knowledge in the world fell into a great standing order”—to a realization by the end of the century that achieving such “comprehensive knowledge” was “easier said than done.” His subject is nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British literature, and his contention is that these texts reveal an obsession with the control of knowledge bound up with the imperial project. In these pages the empire is “united not by force but by

information.” The faith that facts would add up to knowledge—that there could be such a thing as “one great system of knowledge” in the tradition of Leibniz, Kant, Humboldt, and Romanticism—was gradually abandoned.⁶⁴ Thus, “by 1900 not even the librarians at the British Museum seriously believed they would be able to chip away at this backlog of knowledge.”⁶⁵ Richards provides an epistemological paradigm through which I will consider the conflicted place of detail and the aesthetics of painting during a period of historical and cultural transformation.

Information claimed no particular beginning and promised no end. The 1857 edition of Webster’s dictionary gives the first definition of “information” as “Intelligence: notice, news or advice communicated by word or writing.”⁶⁶ The term became associated with accumulation and communication. In the mid- to late nineteenth century, compound forms of the word began appearing in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, among them: “information bureau” (1869), “information agent” (1871), “information gap” (1891), and “information gathering” (1893). For the last term, the Oxford dictionary cites W. G. Collingwood’s *The Life and Work of John Ruskin*: “The intelligent analysis of words and thoughts and feelings of great authors, as opposed to . . . superficial information-gathering.”⁶⁷ By the end of the century, “information” had assumed an increasingly random, dispersed, and superficial connotation.⁶⁸

The “culture” of detail that I consider is undoubtedly Western and, more specifically, Anglo-American. While greater investigations of detail in other contexts could surely be undertaken (and have already been done, in the case of Arasse), I have limited myself here to an American artist who traveled widely but worked within a decidedly Anglo-American context. This is one reason that I have adopted critical models proposed by scholars of the Victorian period. I find the arguments by scholars such as Richards and Christ to be convincing and also particularly applicable to Church’s work. While I do not mean to collapse the American nineteenth century into a mere subset of the British period, there is undoubtedly a close connection between the two nations. In the realm of art and aesthetic theory, Americans were deeply influenced by the British. Church looked at Turner; he read Ruskin and Reynolds. He repeatedly sent his canvases across the ocean for display and eagerly sought the approval of English critics.⁶⁹

My aim is to illuminate the paintings’ aesthetic, historical, and cultural specificity while avoiding the narrative of American exceptionalism. Church was unarguably patriotic; some of his pictures have explicitly nationalist aims and many others have national connotations. These distinctions are sometimes productive, but more often they are limiting. David Huntington seems to draw a bright line between nationalism and aesthetic originality, writing that Church “was an American, but not a revolutionary.”⁷⁰ While I do not think that arguing for Church as a revolutionary would be particularly productive—in the same way that calling him a modernist would not really tell us anything—I do want to focus on the artist’s means of representation. When do details complicate a larger narrative and how do they acquire, or even resist, meaning? The purpose of this book is to take detail seriously as a key component of Church’s visual language, as a defining aspect of nineteenth-century American culture, and as a concept fundamental to the practice of art history.

Each of the following chapters concentrates on one or two of Frederic Church’s works in order to contend with the meaning of detail. Such a focused approach will, I hope, illuminate broader cultural shifts while remaining invested in fundamentally visual, and art historical, questions. This is by no means a comprehensive monograph. While the works at the core of this study span Church’s career and reflect his major voyages, I have selected images that, above all, most provocatively engage with the question of detail and that best express its changing status during the second half of the nineteenth century. Included here are Church’s most popular pictures, later paintings that were in differing ways

more private, and his longest and most extensive artistic project that engaged a new sense of the “medium” of landscape. Through these landscapes, the book traces a movement away from a more synthetic model of painting that ends with *Olana*, a work of art made out of the physical environment.

Chapter 1 focuses on Church’s *Niagara*. In 1857, a year of increasing sectional tensions, the painting was appropriated as a model of unity, one based on the assimilation of details. Such assimilation also connects the painting to a “monumental” form of history predicated on forgetting, one that differs from an emerging historical discourse at the time that privileged memory and conceived of the past through the particularities of geography. The canvas became enormously popular, its printed reproductions a staple of middle-class parlors and a favorite wedding gift. The work’s wide dissemination thus raised the issue of the relationship between aesthetics and class. Was popularity and reproducibility anathema to “high” art?

In the second chapter, I argue that two paintings produced after Church’s trips to South America represent two models of visualizing and comprehending the natural world. While *The Andes of Ecuador* reflects Humboldt’s cosmology, *The Heart of the Andes* is a Darwinian painting, although Church undoubtedly intended quite the opposite effect. Details compete for attention and project a sense of exuberant excess. *The Heart of the Andes* is the product of the increasingly unstable relationship between faith and science at mid-century, and particularly in 1859, the year that *The Origin of Species* was published.⁷¹ Humboldt’s concept of nature—what he called “one great whole animated by the breath of life”—would come to seem like a beautiful, but impossible, vision.⁷²

The third chapter explores how details in *The Heart of the Andes* demand a different way of seeing exemplified by scanning across the canvas with opera glasses. Isolating details with their opera glasses, and so isolating themselves from other spectators, viewers undertook an intensely subjective and unstructured act, an act of looking marked by both pleasure and pain. The painting also produced a surprising number of texts; critics and writers, among them Louis Legrand Noble, Theodore Winthrop, and Mark Twain, attempted to translate the visual into the textual but in doing so they confront the fundamental difference between viewing and interpreting. The question of excess presents a narrative dilemma for Winthrop and Noble. What if details did not add up to that “large and appealing thing”? Twain’s engagement with the painting’s details provides a model for thinking about the work of art, one that challenges the implicit assumption that seeing in greater detail leads to greater knowledge.

The Heart of the Andes best expresses the close association between the detail and the material world during this period when modern consumer culture was developing in the United States. Exhibited on Broadway in the shopping district of lower Manhattan, Church’s painting bears comparison to the new department store window with its invitation to look at so many “things.” The very word “detail” was first adopted in the context of commodity exchange, used in the phrase *en détail*, or “by piece,” as opposed to *en gros*, meaning “in the gross” or “wholesale.”⁷³ As arguably the most popular painting in mid-nineteenth-century America—one reviewer declaring it “the inauguration of a new art epoch”⁷⁴—this picture demands a more extended consideration across two chapters. As the subject of immense linguistic production, *The Heart of the Andes* provides the opportunity to think through questions of the relationship between image and text, visual and verbal language.

The fourth and fifth chapters each focus on a painting that struggles with or withholds details. *The Icebergs* promises the sublime but instead diagrams the problems of representing transcendence through detail. Church’s later insertion of a broken ship’s mast may gesture to many meanings—scientific, mythological, religious, and political—but it refuses to resolve into one. This addition, intended to address the painting’s lack of narrative direction, in fact makes the picture more boldly unclear. As with *The Heart of the Andes*, texts attempt to bring form and structure to such uncertainty.

metaphor is unleashed in an effort to animate, or compensate for, the expanses of white ice—all that white paint.

Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica highlights the absence of symbolic cues. The picture is constructed around a spot-lit part of the foreground and is characterized, like *The Heart of the Andes*, by scientific precision. The picture's two most striking features—detail and absence—are intimately related to the Jamaican landscape itself, which was marked by both lush botanical diversity and by plantations abandoned in the wake of emancipation. *Vale of St. Thomas*—an American artist's depiction of a British Caribbean colony—was painted following the Civil War in the United States and the Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica. The intersection between race, economics, and violence takes a surprising prominent place in Church's painting, as does the issue of visual memory. If *The Icebergs* charts the breakdown of iconography, *Vale of St. Thomas* presents a startling lack of iconography.

The sixth and seventh chapters consider a two- and a three-dimensional landscape: *El Khasné*, *Petra* and *Olana*. Church's image of a sacred site in the Holy Land dispenses with the traditional features of landscape painting. There is no sky, no framing trees, no foreground details or background mountains, no panoramic horizontality. The painting is the detail. While portraying a place of spiritual significance, *El Khasné* suggests the limits of faith. As in Herman Melville's long poem *Clarel*, a contemporaneous work that also addresses Petra, the question becomes: how can art be produced in the face of—or even out of—doubt? If *Olana* represents Church's desire to create aesthetic form out of a natural world, a Darwinian world, that increasingly resisted such order, *El Khasné, Petra* suggests the impossibility of satisfying such intentions.

El Khasné, Petra is a radically compressed landscape, a mysterious, even unsettling, vertical painting that Church hung in his family's sitting room at *Olana*, designing the room around the image. But with *Olana*, which he was simultaneously constructing, Church moved beyond the limitations of the canvas and the constraints of pictorial composition. Working with the natural world and the changeability of its details, he could make “more and better” landscapes. The estate is composed in the eighteenth-century language of the picturesque, an aesthetic that allowed Church to shape and frame the landscape, not to create a single composition, but to construct an almost infinite number of views. It was a means to rethink scale, process, and visual experience while also engaging with pressing ecological questions. In creating *Olana*, Church worked with the spatial and material specificity of a certain site. He becomes, to use Robert Smithson's phrase (applied to Frederick Law Olmsted), an “earthwork artist.”⁷⁵

Such terms can help to reframe Church's project, moving it beyond the boundaries of the nineteenth century and the stubborn disciplinary border of 1945—that so problematically claims to separate “American art” from “modern art”—to come into surprising dialogue with the works of artists like Smithson and Dan Flavin, whom I discuss in the epilogue. In part because modernism has largely dismissed or ignored the landscapes of Church and his contemporaries, the specific and powerful relevance of their pictorial mode—an aesthetic of detail—has been insufficiently explored. And this raises the question: is representational detail what modernism implicitly works against?

The details in Church's landscapes emerge from the material world, from nature's “things.” They signal a turn toward a scientific realism while still adhering to Romanticism's structural elements. His paintings are based on an aesthetic of detail that retains a desire for a greater system. Church is trying to make an older model relevant, as if all those details could furnish positivistic proof that Romantic ideals were still possible, observable, natural. This is not, in other words, the emergence of a new mode of representation—not what we can arguably see in Edouard Manet or in Impressionism—but an attempt to work from within an existing visual paradigm. Through recourse to ever-greater particularity, Church undertakes a visual defense of what Carol Christ has called “the reality of universals.”⁷⁶ And

it is precisely this attempt at mimetic representation, and its proliferation, that threatened the symbolic coherence of a painting like *The Heart of the Andes* for viewers at the time. One may look more closely to gain visual precision and expect a corresponding interpretive clarity, but seeing in detail can lead to semiotic instability. Perhaps this is what is “lacking” for us as present-day viewers, to return to Albert Ten Eyck Gardner’s speculation about Church’s popularity. We are not unsettled by a painting that appears to be more interested in its own representational condition than in our interpretation of it. But this was an anxiety for nineteenth-century viewers.

I cannot offer textual proof that Church was conscious of such tensions. He reflected on his aesthetic practice very little; although volumes of his letters and three diaries from his trips remain, he seldom addresses why and how he paints. But his paintings provide the evidence, and I believe it is the art historian’s task to mine the canvases as one would an archive, to look closely, and to consult the parallel archive of historical documents to consider why these paintings were loved or hated, praised or ignored. Church’s landscapes are my primary sources, and yet it is impossible to “quote” from images. Details provide the closest analogy— bracketing or splicing part from whole as if to construct little blocks of quotations. As sites of quotation, they are *like* texts, and yet they constantly remind us that they are *not* texts.

There is an inherent subjectivity at work when writing about detail; what constitutes “part” and “whole,” and also where one crops a work of art to create a “detail,” are culturally and historically constructed but are also based on the individual act of perception. Perhaps this subjectivity is why period critics often rely on nonvisual ways to characterize detail, why Church’s details, for instance, become associated with scientific facts (and thus objectivity) or material things. Such physical or conceptual stability would seem to counterbalance the unpredictability and individuality of vision. Church’s details invite a rush of language that works to conceal their perceptual origins.

I see my methodology as being fundamentally object-centered, one practiced by art historians such as Bryan Wolf, Alexander Nemerov, Jennifer Roberts, and Rachael DeLue, among others. Making the work of art the touchstone for one’s inquiry involves a couple of propositions: first, that the work of art and an artist’s intentions for that work are often two different things and, secondly, that writing about art is a process of translation. By placing the object—rather than the artist (or the artist’s writings)—at the center of inquiry, the visual is given pride of place. This relates to the second assumption: that art history is a process of translation. Art historians translate the visual into textual language when writing about objects. Wanda Corn calls this “thick description”—a resonant phrase.⁷⁷ And to describe is to interpret. These may seem like self-evident statements, but they are all too often neglected or even, in a sense, repressed, allowing for problematic assumptions that different forms of evidence—the artist’s biography, a reviewer’s words, an artist’s letters—could stand in for the (silent) visual object. These all too easily become the “primary” documents that are offered to “explain” the object. To be sure, these are critically important sources that must be considered, and I will make use of them all. But they are not the work of art itself. My contention is that any art historical interpretation relies on how we see and describe a visual object (ekphrasis), and that means that any interpretation starts from a place of quite radical subjectivity. Not unlike the detail, description as an art historical mode is, as Jaś Elsner has argued about ekphrasis, at once foundational and easily overlooked.⁷⁸

This project grew out of an interest in thinking about a specific mode of nineteenth-century painting, one that seems, through its details, to be consumed by so many *things*, the stuff of the natural world. Church’s approach connects him with scientists of the period, and not just with Humboldt (an influence that scholars have discussed at length) but with Darwin as well. Church and Darwin may seem like unlikely bedfellows; although Church was passionately interested in science, he resisted

Darwin's theories of evolution. But they share compellingly similar methods: a keen, even obsessive sense of observation, a desire to collect natural facts—as sketches or specimens—and a need to put them all together, those “endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful,” to use the phrase from the final sentence of *The Origin of Species*.⁷⁹ Through detail, empiricism is wed to epiphany. To see detail is to examine the world, to touch it with the hands or get closer with the eyes. It is no coincidence that the images on the covers of both Naomi Schor's *Reading in Detail* and Daniel Arasse's *Le détail* feature a detail of hands in the act of touching and gesturing.

The detail conveys art at its greatest proximity and often at its most strange and unfamiliar. The poet Elizabeth Bishop describes this experience in one of her letters. “Reading Darwin, one admires the beautiful solid case being built up out of his endless heroic *observations*, almost unconscious or automatic—and then comes a sudden relaxation, a forgetful phrase, and one *feels* the strangeness of his undertaking, sees the lonely young man, his eyes fixed on facts and minute details, sinking or sliding giddily off into the unknown.”⁸⁰ Out of all those “facts and minute details,” out of that “beautiful solid case,” emerges the “strangeness” of all this accumulating. To see in detail is to pursue knowledge only to discover, instead, the beautiful strangeness of seeing.

The Monumental Image

SEEN FROM A DISTANCE, the painting is controlled by a strong but simple geometry. The rectangular form of the canvas is echoed in the long band of sky. The straight edge of the horizon line divides the image horizontally. The cataract stretches nearly the entire length of the more than seven-and-a-half-foot picture, the diagonal of the near rim and the wide inward curve of the far shore constructing its boundaries. Jagged shelves of rocks appear just before the precipice. Deep purple clouds at the right carry the eye into the background, their uneven border mirrored by the shapes of the rocks below. At the left, a fragment of a rainbow leads to its terminus in the blur of mist. Shades of blue, green, and white dominate. From afar, *Niagara* is a painting of insistent unity (fig. 2).

Moving closer, each blue swell and white cap becomes visible. The sense of choppy, deeper water near the bottom edge is created by rounded, dark green strokes while little ragged crescents of bright white give form to the more turbulent portions. Such areas also appear stippled with white pigment, the countless waves and churning froth communicated by individual dots and flecks, each visible on the surface and yet rarely resulting in a demonstrable thickness that one could call impasto. As a result, the foreground retains its representational illusion even at very close range. A drop of paint comes to stand for a drop of water in a seemingly natural way: the medium looks like its subject, the pictorial equivalent of onomatopoeia. In a sense, a detail in *Niagara* could be just a single speck of white paint. But it is the accumulation of so many specks that delineate different kinds of motion in the immediate foreground and that invite the eye in any number of directions, through the vast range of scale within the representational schema of the picture. How to manage this is the challenge of the painting.

In this chapter, I will argue that this was at once a pictorial challenge—how to unify the details—and a cultural one; constructing an appearance of “union” in 1857 had significant political and social stakes. I see the function of detail in *Niagara* not only in terms of its own historical moment but also in relation to new ways of representing the past: popular illustrated histories published at mid-century offered landscapes as privileged sites of national memory. In these texts, place becomes history, available to all. The discourse around the popularity of Church’s picture, which was widely purchased as an engraving and chromolithograph, reveals the increasingly codified cultural categories of “high” and “low,” shaped by questions of reproduction, mimesis, and detail.



FIGURE 2 Frederic Edwin Church, *Niagara*, 1857. Oil on canvas, 40 × 90 ½ in. (101.6 × 229.9 cm). National Gallery of Art,

READING NIAGARA

No individual detail in *Niagara* immediately claims the viewer's attention. The water draws the eye in, but no one droplet or wave or cascade seems more important than another. Eschewing the usual perspective from high above or below, the painting places the viewer at the edge of the cataract, just above the water, or even in it, as some critics interpreted the viewpoint. "The brown jagged verge above the western section of the Horse-shoe Fall was at my feet," one wrote.¹ There is no land to provide orientation or stability. Thus a detail that might otherwise be overlooked becomes more compelling, and not easily resolved: an uprooted tree serves as the first point of contact in the immediate foreground (fig. 3). A hollow base and gnarled roots indicate that this is a trunk, although its small size and oddly indeterminate scale make it appear more like a branch or limb. Tilted up, as if carried on the crest of a wave, this tree seems about to head over the rim of the Falls. But its angle might also indicate that it has been caught on an unseen rock below, causing white foam to gather on its right side, the one area where paint has been visibly built up. While such possibilities may seem insignificant, the tree's ambiguous position in the picture points to a more serious tension. This detail proposes conflicting interpretations. If we see the trunk as caught, it can then be read as an emblem of stability and even stillness in the midst of the momentum and turmoil of so much rushing water. In the preparatory sketch from 1856–57, rocks in fact occupy the spot where the tree is located in the painting (fig. 4). But if we see the trunk as on the verge of a steep plunge, it suggests danger. One reading offers a tenuous security, the other a sense of imminent peril. Far from land and lacking roots severed from its original landscape, the tree in *Niagara* does not provide clear symbolic guidance.



FIGURE 3 Detail of Frederic Edwin Church, *Niagara*, 1857. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Corcoran Collection, Museum purchase, Gallery Fund.

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