

The Sensational and the Sublime: An Examination of Frederic Church's Arctic Masterpiece  
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During the nineteenth century, an almost maniacal obsession with progress swept through the United States. As the Industrial Revolution transformed the country, Americans seemed more determined than ever to exploit the vast wilderness that lay to the west. Amid this fervor, however, backlash against the denigration of Mother Nature arose amidst the artistic community, leading to the rise of the American Romantic movement that celebrated the sublime—an emphasis on nature's power that evoked astonishment and awe from the viewer.<sup>1</sup> One of the leading American Romantic painters, Frederic Edwin Church, criticized America's move to the west and subsequent disregard for nature throughout his artistic career. His arctic masterpiece, *The Icebergs*, offers a glorification of nature's sublimity in order to elicit awe, wonder, and respect from the viewer.

Massive icebergs tower under a glowing sky, offering testament to Mother Nature's dominance by instilling astonishment and fear in the audience. Long fascinated by the natural world, Church visited icebergs off Newfoundland and Labrador prior to painting *The Icebergs*, and the breathtaking seascape expresses his wonder at Mother Nature's imposing creations.<sup>2</sup> The icebergs' jagged forms present an inhospitable and unforgiving environment that reinforces nature's potent power. Furthermore, an iceberg obscures the horizon from the viewer, shrouding nature in mystery; the concealment of the horizon underscores nature's supremacy by obstructing not only the background but awareness of what lies beyond.<sup>3</sup> Even the massive size of the painting—more than nine feet wide—overwhelms the viewer, transforming Church's depiction of nature into a dramatic, spectacular, and powerful vision.

The later inclusion of a broken ship mast in the painting's foreground furthers Church's emphasis on the sublime by reinforcing nature's sweeping authority. The mast most likely references Sir John Franklin's ill-fated attempt to discover a Northwest Passage in 1845. Franklin's whereabouts were unknown until 1859 when a rescue expedition found the skeletons of the crew, two years before Church painted *The Icebergs*.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Church's sketching trip to the arctic took place during the arrival of the last English search party, and thus he was well aware of the shipwreck. Franklin's demise captivated the public, and the incident drastically altered the public's romanticized perception of the Arctic by exposing the perils of adventure, a shift that Church sought to epitomize in the addition of the mast.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the decision to paint the small mast in the foreground – as opposed to depicting a larger ship as the focal point – adds a sense of scale thus underscoring the icebergs' gigantic size. Indeed, the icebergs seem to swallow the broken mast, reflecting Church's desire to inspire awe and fascination in his viewers through an emphasis on the sublime.

More than a century later, few artistic movements have managed to convey the magnificence of nature as skillfully as the American Romantic movement. *The Icebergs*, painted during the height of the Industrial Revolution, seeks to reestablish reverence for nature by focusing on the sensational and the sublime. Although it may have failed to prevent the destruction of nature in the nineteenth century, Church's painting is more relevant than ever in an era where humanity continues to threaten nature in its foolish quest for progress.

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Burke, "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of the Sublime and Beautiful," in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: John C. Nimmo, 1887), 130-132.

<sup>2</sup> John K. Howat, *Frederic Church* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 2005), 91.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Raab, "Precisely These Objects: Frederic Church and the Culture of Detail," *The Art Bulletin* 95, no. 4 (December 2013): 590.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Dalton, *Sir John Franklin: Expeditions to Destiny* (Victoria; Heritage House Publishing Co., 2012), 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Eleanor Jones Harvey, *The Voyage of the Icebergs* (Dallas; Dallas Museum of Art, 2002), 46.