



# A Portentous Landscape

Frederic Edwin Church's theatrical vision struck a timely national chord.



The Cleveland Museum of Art; Mr. and Mrs. William H. Mariatt Fund.

AT FIRST BLUSH, *Twilight in the Wilderness* by Frederic Edwin Church isn't my favorite type of painting—the colors are lurid and the presentation is cinematic. For Church, the unveiling of a new painting was something like a movie premiere: the small oil sketch upon which Church based *Twilight* was shown at the National Academy annual of 1859, and was a teaser for the finished canvas, exhibited in a New York gallery the following year. Soon thereafter, the only way for the public to view Church's major works was to pay an admission fee at his studio door. My reservations notwithstanding, *Twilight* is a masterpiece, one which the eminent art historian John Wilmerding described as

“among the dozen greatest paintings in the history of American art.”

Context is helpful. As Wilmerding noted, the painting's power derives from a confluence of sources, “the meteorological, the spiritual, and the national.” Through the 1850s, Church was fascinated with vivid sunsets, an obsession so influential that by 1864 a critic complained that “we are undergoing a virulent epidemic of sunsets” traceable to Church's example. Some scholars have proposed that the colors of this canvas were inspired by the skies of two specific evenings, those of June 21–22, 1858. Church's naturalism was adjoined to his religious beliefs, and the Transcendentalist literature of the

**ABOVE: *Twilight in the Wilderness*** (1860; oil on canvas, 40 x 64)

period supported his view of the wilderness as Eden. Though Church was one of many American painters in the 19th century who saw God's presence in the pristine landscape, the sense of foreboding he summoned in *Twilight*—numerous commentators likened the scene to a “Day of Judgment”—was noteworthy.

The apocalyptic implications of the fiery sky and its reflection in the water have been interpreted as a response to the impending national crisis of civil war. This allegorical connection was made explicit the following year when Church painted a similar motif with a red, white and

blue sunset forming the illusion of a torn American flag. The devastating effects of the Civil War would be referenced through metaphor in American landscape painting for many years, in the guise of desolate scenery and dead trees. *Twilight in the Wilderness* presages these conventions. Church's picture is a portent of physical violence, of mass bloodshed.

Which is not to say that this was Church's conscious intention. One of the luxuries of retrospective analysis is to glean significance that the artist may never have meant, and can neither confirm nor dispute. But even if we abstain from such conjecture we are still left with a painting that is undeniably rhetorical—when compared to the sketch that preceded it, it becomes clear that the composition of *Twilight in the Wilderness* was designed for

maximum dramatic effect. The most chromatic clouds are placed at upper left, their diagonal balanced by tall trees to the right; the sweeping breadth of the sky is answered by intricate foreground detail. The pervasive shadow tones are relieved only by a band of pale green at the horizon. A picture whose design requires 90 percent dark values will evoke a somber mood. With *Twilight in the Wilderness*, Church's observations of atmospheric effects achieved a moving emotional resonance.

If *Twilight in the Wilderness* strikes a melodramatic note, it's well to remember that Church was working in a more romantic time, when painting served a different purpose than it does today. One of those purposes was to illustrate places that were still unknown to most viewers. A lot of his fellow New Yorkers had

## Catch the Show!

*Twilight in the Wilderness* is included in the exhibition "Maine Sublime: Frederic Church's *Twilight in the Wilderness*," at the Cleveland Museum of Art until January 25.

presumably never been to Maine and, in an era before color photography, television and the Internet, a grand painting of the American wilderness laden with symbolic meaning must have possessed immense power. It still does. ▢

**JERRY N. WEISS** is a contributing editor to *The Artist's Magazine*. He teaches at the Art Students League of New York. To see more of his work, visit [www.jerryneweiss.com](http://www.jerryneweiss.com).

## artistsnetworktv

### ART WORKSHOPS ON DEMAND

Stream workshop videos in your home or studio and enjoy expert art instruction at your own pace!

At **ArtistsNetwork.tv** you'll find:

- More than 300 instructional videos by professional artists
- The widest variety of mediums, subjects and skill levels available online
- Ideas, inspiration and instruction that will help you take your art to the next level
- Multiple subscription options that allow you to choose the videos that are right for you
- 24-hour access from any internet connection

Visit **ArtistsNetwork.tv** today!

Brought to you by the Publishers of *North Light Books* and *The Artist's Magazine*



Artist & Instructor **Liz Haywood-Sullivan**

**PLUS**, for a limited time, you can **SAVE 10%** on your subscription with coupon code **ATVMAG2014A**.