



***The Icebergs***  
**Frederic Edwin Church, American, 1826-1900**  
**Oil on canvas, 1861, 64 1/2 x 112 1/2 inches**  
**Dallas Museum of Art, anonymous gift**

### **About the Artist**

Frederic Edwin Church was the only son of a rich Hartford, Connecticut, family. Though he was independently wealthy, he wanted to be an artist rather than pursue the traditional education expected for rich young men of his time. When he was eighteen he began to draw from nature and was sent to study with Thomas Cole, a successful and important American painter. After three years as a student living in Cole's home, Church went to New York in 1848. Although he was wealthy enough to go to Europe to study, as was expected of artists of his day, Church had no interest in going. He was interested in light and color and the glories of natures he found around him.

However, in 1853, Cyrus W. Field, who would later lay the Atlantic cable, urged Church to accompany him to South America in search of a brother who had vanished. Because of his interest in dramatic landscapes, nature, science, and the spectacular wonders he expected to find in the Andes and the primitive forests near the Amazon, Church decided to go. While in South America, he spent a few months in Colombia and Ecuador, went six hundred miles up the Magdalena River, and traveled on a mule to see volcanoes in the Andes. His South American paintings were well received after his return, but his painting of Niagara Falls, exhibited in 1857, was so popular that it was exhibited to crowds as the only work in the dealer's gallery. His next painting to stun audiences was *The Heart of the Andes* in which he tried to show in a single, large canvas all of the wonders of a second trip to South America.

In 1859, Church was at the height of his career. He enjoyed great reputation and celebrity. His painting *Niagara* was in its third year of attracting viewers and *The Heart of the Andes* had attracted large crowds first London and then in New York and Boston. Exploration in the Arctic was important during this time, and Church traveled to see

icebergs off Labrador and Newfoundland. His public anxiously awaited the unveiling of his newest painting, which was displayed for the public in New York April 24, 1861.

In December 1867, at the age of forty-one, Church went for the first time to Europe. He stayed there less than two years, and after his return, he put into large canvases what he had seen. At the age of 51, inflammatory rheumatism permanently crippled Church's right hand, and he tried, with little success, to work only using his left hand.

### **About the Art**

Frederic Church was inspired by the dramatic landscapes in his own country, and by those he visited in South America, Europe, and the Arctic. In *The Icebergs*, he shows his viewers the power and grandeur of icebergs he saw off the coast of Newfoundland.

Church, and other artists of this period, saw a manifestation of the power of God in the awesome and powerful glories of nature. Church was fascinated by the dramatic icy scenery and by the adventurous explorers who braved the dangerous waters. The broken mast in the foreground of *The Icebergs* honors the English explorer Sir John Franklin who had gone down with his three ships in the northern seas. The mast represents the fragility of man in contrast to the power of nature. The mast was not in the painting when it was first on exhibition, but was added in late 1862 or early 1863 before *The Icebergs* was taken to London.

### **Additional Information**

Reviewers agreed that *The Icebergs* was a triumph, and one writer said it was the most splendid work of art that has yet been produced in this country...an absolutely wonderful picture, a work of genius which illustrates the time and the country producing it.

By the time *The Icebergs* was ready for public exhibition, the Civil War had begun, and the nation was in turmoil. The title of the painting was originally *The North-Church's Picture of Icebergs*, and that title revealed Church's loyalties. He allocated all exhibition fees to a fund established to support soldiers' dependents. Each viewer paid 25 cents to see the painting.

### **About the Time and Place**

The year that *The Icebergs* was completed, 1861, saw the United States disunited. Kansas entered the Union as a free-state in January, but Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, and North Carolina seceded between January and May. South Carolina had seceded late in 1860. Jefferson Davis was named provisional president of the Confederate States of America on February 4. The Civil War began on April 12 when Fort Sumter was bombarded by General Beauregard, the commander of the Confederate Army. President Abraham Lincoln called for volunteers to serve for three years in the U.S. Army, and by July, 30,000 recruits were under the command of Winfield Scott.

A Western Union telegraph line was opened between San Francisco and New York despite efforts to prevent it by hostile Indian tribes and Confederate sympathizers. This service brought an end to the Pony Express, which had started in 1860. With manpower scarce because of the war, the Central Pacific Railroad president recruited Chinese workers to build the western section of a proposed transcontinental railroad. Approximately 9,000 of 10,000 workers were Chinese.

Gail Borden built factories to produce condensed milk, purchased by the Union Army for field rations. Gilbert C. Van Camp secured an army contract to supply canned pork and beans to Union troops.

In 1861, Charles Dickens completed *Great Expectations*, and *Silas Marner* was completed by George Eliot.