Basic Detail Report

Title: West Rock, New Haven
Date: 1849
Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e0aa
Medium: Oil on canvas
Description: In 1847 Church established a studio in New York and set about making his reputation by painting radiantly beautiful compositions of scenery he had sketched during summer tours in New England and New York state. It was an opportune moment, for a prosperous class of merchants and businessmen had arisen that was well inclined to encourage the arts. Landscape painting, which celebrated the special beauties of the American land itself and which seemed to embody many national aspirations and dreams, was deemed especially worthy of support. Church and other landscape painters who became known as the Hudson River School were able to find ample patronage as well as plentiful opportunities for exhibiting their work. In July 1848 Church spent time sketching in the vicinity of New Haven, including the area around West Rock. West Rock and its companion, East Rock, were well-known striking bluffs. Church made a meticulous drawing of West Rock seen from the south with the West River winding along a meadow (Olana State Historic Site, Hudson, N.Y.). Using a numbered system, with a key written at the upper left, he noted such details as the coloring of West Rock ("lights of the rock

warm orange," "shadows warm brown"), the various types of trees visible (willow, elm, and apple), and scattered white wild flowers and weeds in the meadow. He also made a thumbnail sketch of a church steeple at the upper right of the drawing, just below the inscription of "West Rock, N. Haven 1848-July." For his finished painting, Church carefully followed the drawing but made a few significant changes and additions. The flower-filled meadow was replaced with a field of freshly mown hay, complete with men working and hay wagons; a white church steeple was added below West Rock and slightly to the left; and a splendid blue sky filled with drifting white clouds was placed above the scene. The result is a work of lyrical beauty, celebrating not only the pastoral charm of the American landscape and the unique character of one of its geological monuments but also paying homage to the labors of the industrious citizens who were reaping the bounty of this new Paradise. It would be difficult to imagine a more lucid expression of nature's lessons. In fact, West Rock even seemed to meet even John Ruskin's conditions of excellence. The first volumes of Ruskin's "Modern Painters" were just becoming known in America, and his "truth to nature" aesthetics were already gaining wide influence among artists, connoisseurs, and critics. Church was reading "Modern Painters" at this very moment; his pupil William Stillman recalled having come across a copy in his studio in 1848.(1) Church's own inclination toward a detailed factual portrayal of nature would have been strongly reinforced by Ruskin, and Church would have agreed with the English critic's ideas about the beauties of the natural world being reflections of a higher order and the plan of God. Ruskin encouraged landscape painters to express the deeper meanings of nature: "The teaching of nature is as varied and infinite as it is constant; and the duty of the painter is to watch for every one of her lessons."(2) But for Church's American contemporaries "West Rock, New Haven" not only spoke of the beauties and lessons of nature but also told a specifically national story. Two seventeenth-century Englishmen who had opposed the Crown, Edward Whalley and William Goffe, held prominent positions as judges under Cromwell.(3) In 1649 Whalley, Goffe, and several other judges sentenced King Charles I to death for crimes against the English people. When the monarchy was restored, Charles II executed many of the judges, but Whalley and Goffe fled to America, arriving in Boston in 1660. Constantly pursued by royal agents, they moved on to Connecticut, where sympathetic colonists kept them hidden in a cave at West Rock. For Americans of Church's day, the story of Whalley and Goffe, who were considered symbolic "regicides," foreshadowed the nation's struggle for independence from Britain. Thus, West Rock stood as a permanent and prominent reminder of the principles upon which the new nation has been founded.(4) The peace and plenty of the present were possible only because of the heroic struggles of the past, and landscape painting was thus made to resonate with deeper meanings. Soon after its completion (or possibly even before), "West Rock, New Haven" was purchased by Church's friend Cyrus W. Field, who later became famous as the guiding force behind the laying of the first transatlantic telegraph cable.(5)

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Field was a successful New York businessman, and he and Church had known each other for many years. They had often traveled together (as they would in 1853 to South America), and Field already owned works by the painter. "West Rock" may also make specific reference to the friendship between the two men, with the field in the foreground standing for the owner and the church in the background representing the painter.(6) With its beautifully detailed depiction of nature, its lessons about past and present, and its strong personal associations for the painter, "West Rock, New Haven" stands as one of Church's most appealing creations. It was his first masterpiece, one of those key works in an artist's career that not only summarizes all that has gone before but also announces new interests and predicts new artistic directions. Smaller, quieter, and less imposing than later paintings, such as "Niagara" or "The Heart of the Andes", it nevertheless makes manifestly clear for us today, just as it did for Church's contemporaries, his place "without doubt among our best landscape painters."(7) FK Bibliography: David C. Huntington, "The Landscapes of Frederick Edwin Church: Vision of an American Era" (New York: George Braziller, 1966); Gerald L. Carr, "Frederic Edwin Church: The Icebergs," exhib. cat. (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, 1980); Katherine E. Manthorne, "Creation and Renewal: Views of Cotopaxi by Frederic Edwin Church", exhib. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1985); Franklin Kelly and Gerald L. Carr, "The Early Landscapes of Frederic Edwin Church, 1845-1854" (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1987); Franklin Kelly, "Frederic Edwin Church and the National Landscape" (Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988); Gerald L. Carr, "Frederic Edwin Church: Catalogue Raisonné of Works of Art at Olana State Historic Site", 2 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Notes: 1. William James Stillman, "Autobiography of a Journalist", 2 vols. (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1901), vol. 1, p. 11. 2. John Ruskin, "Modern Painters", in E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, eds., "The Works of John Ruskin", 39 vols. (London: G. Allen; New York: Longmans, Green, 1903-12), vol. #, pt. 2, sect. 1, chap. 4. 3. For the connection between Church's painting and the story of Whalley and Goffe, see Franklin Kelly, "Frederic Edwin Church and the North Landscape, 1845-1860," Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1985, pp. 52-59; Christopher Kent Wilson, "The Landscape of Democracy: Frederic Church's "West Rock, New Haven"," "American Art Journal" 18, no. 3 (1986): 21-39; Kelly and Carr, "Early Landscapes", pp. 47-51, 146-47; and Kelly, "Frederic Edwin Church", pp. 22-24. 4. Although Angela Miller ("The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875" (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 102-5), has argued that the association of West Rock with colonial history would have "remained more vital for local New England audiences than it did for New Yorkers" and thus questioned whether Church's painting would have carried such national meaning, I remain convinced it was a familiar and easily read symbol, even beyond its immediate environs. The story of the "regicides" was widely known and honored, particularly the year West Rock

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appeared, as 1849 marked the two hundredth anniversary of their judgment against Charles I. 5. On Field's connection to Church, see Albert Boime, "The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, ca. 1830-1865" (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp. 61-75. 6. On evidence supporting such a connection, see Wilson, "Landscape of Democracy," pp. 23-28. 7. "Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer", May 3, 1849, quoted in Wilson, "Landscape of Democracy," p. 21.
Dimensions: 27 1/8 × 40 1/8 in. (68.9 × 101.9 cm) Frame: 40 7/8 × 54 × 5 in. (103.8 × 137.2 × 12.7 cm)