As the year 1859 drew to a close and the annual summary of events was drawn up for the record it seemed to some critics that this year would henceforth mark the dawning of a new era in American art. This conclusion was prompted by the remarkable success of two exhibitions that had been held in New York. Erastus Dow Palmer, a sculptor from Albany, who had never been to Europe, held an exhibition of his work, the chef d’oeuvre being his marble White Captive; and Frederick E. Church, another American artist who had been trained at home, placed on view his recently completed masterpiece the Heart of the Andes. This painting was, for many reasons, chiefly responsible for the remarks about a new era in American art.

It is said that Mr. Church received three hundred dollars in admission fees the first day his picture was shown to the public—it had already been sold, and the rumor that William T. Blodgett had paid twenty thousand dollars for it assured it a wide notoriety in circles that seldom turned their attention to American art. This truly regal reward had never before been equaled in the sale of a modern American landscape painting. Another very attractive feature of this picture, and one that especially appealed to the public, was its size—it was ten feet long and five and a half feet high. The subject, too, appealed because of its expansive nature. It was nothing less than a summing up of the Andean massif pictured entire from the rarified arctic air of dizzying peaks down through temperate zones to the green humidity of tropical valleys. It was in one canvas a portrait of an almost complete range of geographical physiognomy, the whole enlivened with that essential ingredient—novelty.

The picture was shown for about a month in New York before being shipped to England, where it was to be displayed in London and engraved. It was then the custom at exhibitions of this sort to take subscriptions for such engravings—a very profitable source of income for the artist with a “hit picture.” “Signed artist’s proofs” of the Heart of the Andes, for instance, were sold at thirty dollars each, “proofs” were priced at twenty, and “prints” on cheaper paper could be had for ten.

The exhibition in London was no less successful than that in New York. The British press hailed the picture as a masterpiece and pointed out the astonishing fact that Church had never had the benefit of European training, which everyone then believed so necessary for success in art. Ruskin had already said his words of faint praise about Church—the papers went into the matter much more wholeheartedly. The London Illustrated News of the World reported: “Coolly to make a trip to South America, to traverse those vast regions where the awful and the beautiful are side by side, to hunt out an altitude of six thousand feet and find an Eden in the midst of girdling mountains whose circlet of snow-fires have never been extinguished, is only to illustrate the principle of the American character, which looks on nature as an auxiliary and not as an obstacle, on distance as a matter of time, on time as a commercial element, on the whole as a commonplace piece of work to be done, and which is done accordingly. The picture is in every way undeniably beautiful. It is finished with a truly artistic appreciation of details.”

The accounts of the Heart of the Andes in American papers and periodicals were, if anything, more laudatory and enthusiastic, and no detail of the painting escaped attention. Two quite exhaustive pamphlets were published for sale at the exhibition room. These tributes
were penned by the Reverend Louis L. Noble, the biographer of Cole, and by Theodore Winthrop, a young novelist and friend of the painter. Both are in the billowing rhetorical style of the day. It seemed as if the authors were attempting with these heaps of obese platitudes to approximate the grandeur of the size and subject of the picture. Only their sincerity saves them from ridiculousness. The serious way in which these tracts were received
and dated 1859. 66\(\frac{1}{8}\) by 119\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches. Bequest of Mrs. David Dows, 1909

may be judged by the review—thirty pages long—accorded them in the Christian Examiner.

The New York Daily Times termed the painting a “grand pictorial poem” and compared its color harmonies with the disturbingly brilliant chords of the modern composers Chopin and Liszt. The indefatigable Henry Tuckerman was on hand with a sonnet on the painting, which was for him “full of the most photographic imitation of natural objects and
effects.” The poet painter T. Buchanan Read exclaimed:

“But never any sight of new-found land
Shall equal this, where we entranced stand
With dewy eyes and overflowing heart,
Gazing from the exalted hill of art!”

To some critics Mr. Church seemed to have “bridged the gulf between the exactitudes of the pre-Raphaelites and the breadth of the post-Raphaelites”; in detail he rivaled the painstaking accuracy of Millais, in vastness of conception he had surpassed Salvator. The religious press hailed the painting as “a picture for young men,” a wholesome antidote to the sensual nakedness of the Greek Slave, the White Captive, and other popular Venuses so shocking to the unworldly. The Heart of the Andes was called a “complete condensation of South America” and it appeared to embody “all the peculiarities and excellencies, which ... have given the stamp of originality to American art.” Though it could not compete in amusement value with the fireworks and parades marking the inaugural ceremonies of the Brooklyn Water Works, it did, as a rival art attraction, seriously overshadow the annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design. In short, this picture made quite a stir in ’59.

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. Something more than the strenuous puffing in the press gave it a powerful claim to the attention of the public in 1859. The further one explores the problem the more one realizes that, though the picture was then acclaimed a triumph of American art, in retrospect it appears as the embodiment through art of significant and popular interests.

This attraction is only hinted at in the well-managed advertising campaign. The clue is to be found in the popular literature of the natural sciences which burgeoned with such effect in the nineteenth century. Possibly it is true that the year 1859 marked the beginning of a new era in American art, though to us it seems much like any other year in the mid-century, but there can be no question that 1859 stands as the end of a millennium and the beginning of a new epoch in the field of natural science.

In that year Darwin stunned the world with the publication of his Origin of Species, and in that year also the most famous man in Europe, the scientist Baron Alexander von Humboldt, died. He was the last of the great naturalist explorers of the old school who embraced all sciences and all of nature before the age of specialization. The position of Humboldt in his day was similar to that now occupied in popular esteem by Einstein. He was honored throughout the world; every scientific body of any consequence claimed him as an honorary member. His name was given by cartographers and explorers to mountains, deserts, rivers, glaciers, and ocean currents. When his book Kosmos was first published in 1845, it immediately became one of the great classics of scientific literature. It was so popular in this country that four editions were issued in New York between 1850 and 1859.

In the second volume of this monumental work there is a long section devoted to the influence of landscape painting on the study of nature. Here landscape painting is considered in its relation to the “representation of the physiognomy and character of different portions of the earth, and as it increases the desire for the prosecution of distant travels, and thus incites men in an equally instructive and charming manner to a free communion with nature.”

After many pages of elaborate erudition on the history of landscape painting Humboldt says: “He who, with a keen appreciation of the beauties of nature manifested in mountains, rivers, and forest glades, has himself travelled over the torrid zone, and seen the luxuriance and diversity of vegetation, on the declivities of the snow-crowned Andes, the Himalayas, or the Nilgherry mountains of Mysore, or in the primitive forests, amid the network of rivers, lying between the Orinoco and the Amazon, can alone feel what an inexhaustible treasure remains still unopened by the landscape painter. ... The spirited and admirable efforts already made in this portion of art fall far
short of the magnitude of those riches of nature, of which it may yet become possessed. Are we not justified in hoping that landscape painting will flourish with a new and hitherto unknown brilliancy when artists of merit shall more frequently pass the narrow limits of the Mediterranean, and when they shall be enabled far in the interior of continents, in the humid mountain valleys of the tropical world, to seize, with the genuine freshness of a pure and youthful spirit, on the true image of the varied forms of nature?"

Humboldt exhorts the artist to make an accumulation of carefully drawn scientific studies and color sketches direct from nature in order that he "may reproduce the character of distant regions in more elaborately finished pictures; and this object will be the more fully obtained, where the painter has, at the same time, drawn or painted direct from nature a large number of separate studies of the foliage of trees; of leafy, flowering, or fruit-bearing stems; of prostrate trunks, overgrown with pothos and orchidaceae; of rocks . . . and the soil of the forest. The possession of such correctly drawn and well proportioned sketches will enable the artist to dispense with all the deceptive aid of hothouse forms, and so called botanical delineations."

"A great event in the history of the world, such as the emancipation of Spanish and Portuguese America from the dominion of European rule . . . will incontestably impart to meteorology and the descriptive natural sciences, as well as to landscape painting, a new impetus and a high tone of feeling. . . . In South America populous cities lie at an elevation of 14,000 feet above the level of the sea. . . . What may we not, therefore, expect from a picturesque study of nature, if . . . a feeling for art shall at length be awakened in those elevated regions?"

"Landscape painting, though not simply an imitative art . . . requires for its development a large number of various and direct impressions, which . . . must be fertilized by the powers of the mind, in order to be given back to the senses of others as a free work of art. The grander style of heroic landscape painting

Baron Alexander von Humboldt, by Julius Schrader, painted at the request of his admirers in America. The mountain in the background is Chimborazo, which also appears in the painting by Church. Gift of H. O. Havemeyer, 1889 is the combined result of a profound appreciation of nature, and of this inward process of mind.”

We may imagine the delight with which Church read these words; their effect on his painting was immediate and profound. It is safe to conjecture that he must have read Humboldt’s Kosmos as soon as the first American edition was published, for suddenly in 1850 his works took on an entirely new character.

Church had been painting the usual Hudson River and New England scenery, sunsets, and large moral landscapes, presented like Sunday School lessons and titled the River of the Waters of Life or the Plague of Darkness—works in the manner of his late master Thomas Cole. The contrast between Church the pupil and Cole the master in their attitudes toward landscape painting is not merely the difference between men of two different generations; it reflects in a most interesting way the development of scientific thought which marked the
life of the nineteenth century. The pious Cole occupied his time with grandiloquent series of imaginary romantic landscapes illustrating elaborate sermons; he was a preacher with a paintbrush. Church, as soon as he escaped the direct influence of Cole, fell immediately under the spell of the modern scientific approach to nature—an approach with an obvious appeal to his practical Yankee mind. His pictures are dedicated to the new religion of science—to the literal recording of stupendous geographical realities composed into "poetical" arrangements built up from the accumulation of many closely studied facts. Apparently Church believed with Agassiz that "a scientific fact is as sacred as a moral principle."

In 1850 Church began to seek out distant geographical or geological subjects such as the Natural Bridge in Virginia and Grand Manan Island in the Bay of Fundy. In 1853 he set out to study the Andes of Ecuador so highly recommended by Humboldt. This first trip was brief, but in 1857 he returned to stay longer and to penetrate farther into the interior. By happy coincidence he stayed in the house where Humboldt had been entertained when he was in Quito, and there Church found an old portrait of his hero which he had copied by a local portrait painter.

If in the Kosmos Humboldt had attempted to give an accurate description and an imaginative conception of the world as known to the senses, under his inspiration the young artist Church set out to paint a series of canvases which would in their grandeur and exactitude illustrate the wishes of the scientist. How closely Church followed the suggestions set forth in the Kosmos is revealed not only by the many careful studies of tropical vegetation and Andean geological formations but also in the novel manner in which the finished painting was exhibited in New York. At one point Humboldt had expressed the belief that painted panoramas—large circular pictures showing the whole horizon—would be a valuable means of popularizing the study of nature. This form of landscape painting had been in vogue in Europe and America when Humboldt was young, but it had fallen somewhat into disrepute in the hands of itinerant showmen. Church was not willing to venture so far into an unpopular and discredited form of peep-show and never attempted to revive it. However, he compromised by spreading his paintings on very large horizontal canvases—they were jestingly termed "full-length landscapes."

As a further concession to Humboldt, the Heart of the Andes was exhibited in a darkened gallery whose walls were draped in dark fabric. The picture, in a heavy gold frame and illuminated brightly by concealed gas jets and reflectors, was banked with dried specimens of Ecuadorian foliage carefully brought back by the artist explorer for this purpose. The picture was presented as a geographical drama. Studio gossips were not slow to add another touch of romance to this theatrical setting by rumoring that Church, shyly hiding behind the curtains to observe the effect of his show, discovered among the crowd of visitors who sat lost in contemplation before the masterpiece, a feminine face of such beauty that here he lost his own susceptible heart while giving to the world the stony Heart of the Andes.

Interest in nature was stirred by the popular works of scientific authors like Humboldt, Lyell, and Tyndall. Ruskin's books on art were practically guides to the appreciation of nature. Among American authors whose works were influential in popularizing nature study were Emerson, Thoreau, Bryant, Downing, Agassiz, George P. Marsh, and the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted (the designer and defender of Central Park). Some of these men must have been known personally to Church—Olmsted, for instance, was, like Church, a native of Hartford. At any rate, the landscape architect Calvert Vaux assisted Church in designing the artist's remarkable house on the Hudson, which, according to one description, was "thoroughly Persian, provincialized only where necessity demanded it." Church had the opportunity to know these authors and, as a cultivated man of his time, must have been familiar with many of their writings.

If serious writers had a somewhat limited audience and most of the reports of explorers
were buried in government publications, the general public was nevertheless well aware of the natural features of the western states and frontier territories through reports in the daily papers on the news from the rich placers of golden California, the sensational if not sinister activities of the Mormons, and the popular narrative of Fremont’s explorations then recently published. Everyone in that day was interested in the hazards of the various routes to the gold fields—what prairies to be crossed, rivers to be forded, mountain passes and deserts to be conquered. These natural features when they represented obstacles to emigrants and often became death-traps to the unwary were subjects of animated discussion. In other words, the American landscape, especially the mountainous wildernesses of the west, was then being dramatized by tragedy and heroic adventure on the frontier. Thus through its subject—a mountainous wilderness—the Heart of the Andes was linked in the imagination of the general public with scenes on the American frontier.

The concern of Church, and the artists of his school, with botany, geology, and meteorology, and his literal translation of the writings of Humboldt into painting, not only give an insight into the mind of the artist but provide an interesting sidelight on the first stirrings in America of the appreciation of nature and the land as a treasure to be preserved rather than as a possession to be exploited.

Church saw himself as the answer to Humboldt’s hopeful questions—he was to be the “artist of merit” who was to “seize, with the genuine freshness of a pure and youthful spirit, on the true image of the varied forms of nature,” he was to be the first to give that “total impression of the torrid zone” in “the grander style of heroic landscape painting.” After his sketching trips to Ecuador Church painted at least sixteen large tropical landscapes. He combined the daring of the explorer, the patient and detailed observation of the naturalist, the meticulously recorded truth of the camera, with the popular qualities of largeness and novelty, all enriched by the romantic cultural appeal of hand-painted art. The popularity of Church and Bierstadt and their followers lasted only until new influences from Barbizon introduced into American art by William Morris Hunt and experiments in the science of color evolved by the Impressionists superseded the science of geography in the estimation of a new generation of artists.