

Frederic E. Church (1856-1925) Sketching in Maine

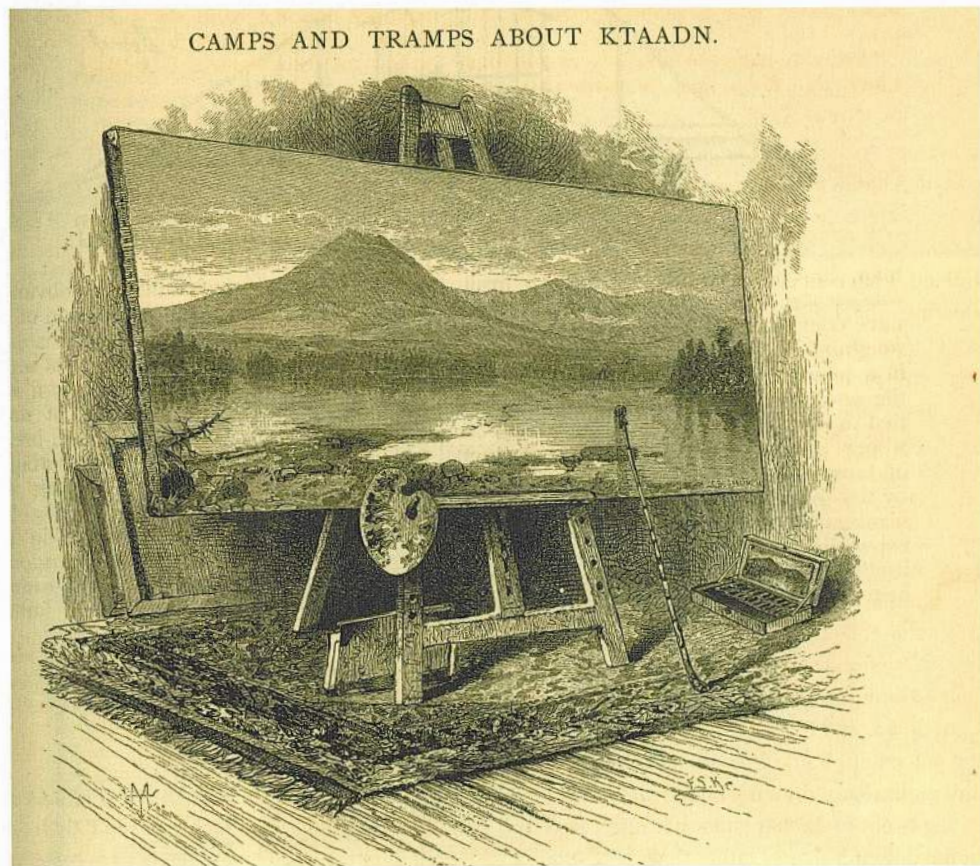
In 1877, Frederic E. Church traveled by railroad, wagon, and sled to paint on one of the highest peaks in New England. His oil sketches are included in an exhibition, *Maine Sublime*, currently on view at his home, Olana, and will travel to the Cleveland Museum of Art.

By Evelyn D. Trebilcock

The acclaimed Hudson River School painter Frederic E. Church (1826-1900), best known for his monumental canvases of the natural wonders of North and South America – *Niagara Falls*, 1857, and *The Heart of the Andes*, 1859 – was by necessity an explorer and outdoorsman as well as an artist. To sketch the waterfalls, volcanoes, mountain lakes, and diverse flora he would work into his major paintings, he hiked mountains, navigated waterways, and sometimes lived off the land.

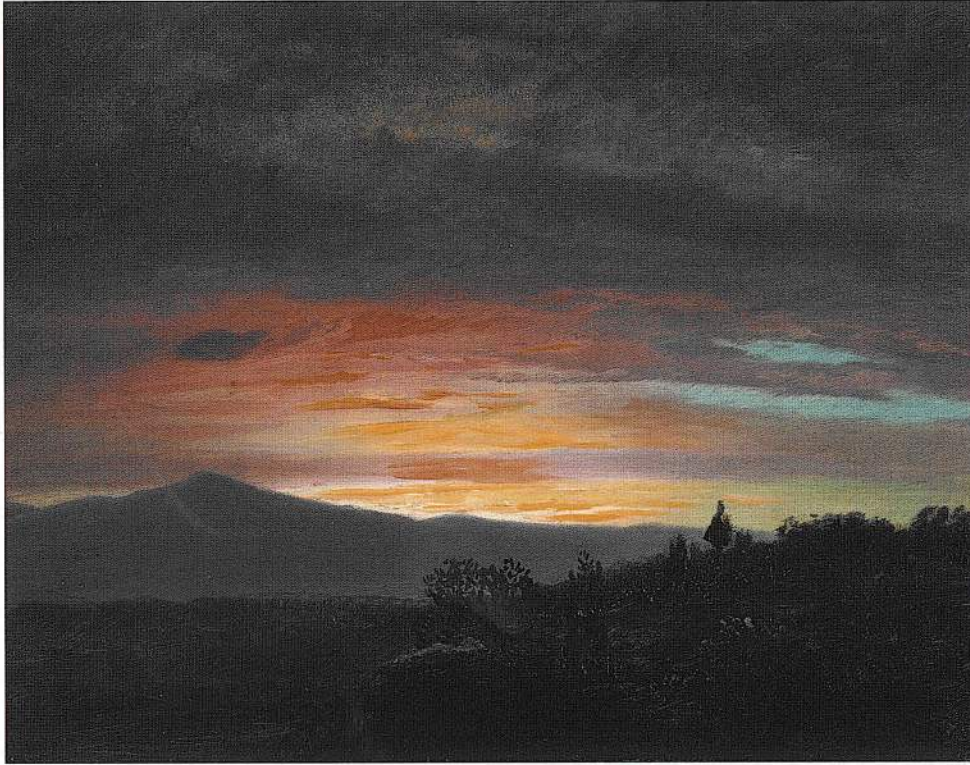
One particular trip to Maine undertaken with friends and fellow artists in 1877 was recorded in an amusing article for the popular arts and culture magazine *Scribner's Monthly: An Illustrated Magazine for the People*; the article, entitled "Camps and Tramps about Ktaadn," was published in May of the following year. The account describes the group's trek to their destination, Mount Katahdin, the camp, their various other activities, and the scenery sought by the artists, particularly Church. The story is illustrated with engravings after a selection of the sketches made by Church and his traveling companions.

While Katahdin did not evoke the exoticism of Church's forays to the jungles of South America or the frigid ice floes of Labrador, it offered vast expanses of American wilderness. Located in north central Maine, Mount Katahdin is one of the highest peaks in New England, rising 5,268 feet. Today part of Baxter State Park, Mount Katahdin was then remote and relatively inaccessible to the public. In fact, to reach Katahdin, Church's group first traveled by railroad and wagons. As they ventured beyond settled areas, they moved their gear to smaller wagons and then into "jumpers," a type of sled, eventually hiking and carrying their gear to reach their permanent camp.



Church was likely inspired to explore Katahdin by the writings of Henry David Thoreau, an early traveler to Maine, who published his leading essay on the subject in the 1848 issue of *Union Magazine*. Church first visited the region in 1852, making subsequent trips in 1856, 1876, 1877, 1878, 1879, and 1880 and thereafter spending summers in the region more sporadically, at his own rustic camp on Lake Millinocket. Sketches from these early excursions record the distinctive peak

**Ktaadn, From the South Shore off the Lake —
From a Study by F.E. Church**
F.S. King, engraver, after Thomas Moran
c. 1878, from A.L. Holley, "Camps and Tramps About
Ktaadn" (*Scribner's Monthly Magazine*, May 1878),
vol. XVI, p. 33
OL.2000.438, collection Olana State Historic Site



Twilight, Mount Katahdin

Frederic Edwin Church

c. 1858-1860, oil on paper mounted on board,
10 1/2 x 13 5/8 in.

Private collection

silhouetted against dramatic sky effects. From the studies of the effects of the late-day sun reflected on clouds, Church's most celebrated sunset painting would emerge first as *Twilight a Sketch* and then as the masterpiece *Twilight in the Wilderness* (Cleveland Museum of Art).

By the time of Church's 1877 visit to Katahdin, wilderness camping was becoming popular. Most wilderness tourists ventured only as far as some of the grand hotels, like the Catskill Mountain House, but others were

Twilight A Sketch

Frederic Edwin Church

1858, oil on canvas, 8 1/4 x 12 1/4 in.

OL.1981.8, collection Olana State Historic Site





Campfire Near Mount Katahdin

Frederic Edwin Church

c. 1877, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 12 3/8 x 20 3/8 in.

OL.1980.1916, collection Olana State Historic Site

more adventurous, camping in the more remote areas of the Adirondacks, White Mountains, and Green Mountains. The paintings by Church and the other Hudson River School artists and the published accounts of the artists' sketching trips encouraged tourists to venture to more isolated locations, like Katahdin. As the *Scribner's* article points out, "that noble mountain," along with its surrounding lakes and forests, had become "representatives of the primal continent," and Katahdin was a favored subject of poets and painters.

'A Practical View Of Camp Life'

"Camps and Tramps about Ktaadn," the lively article that wonderfully captures the recreational spirit of these types of sketching expeditions, was written by Alexander Lyman Holley (1832-1882), a successful mechanical engineer and occasional

travel writer who accompanied his artist friends on the trip. In the playful tone that dominates the piece, the author dubs the party with amusing pseudonyms — Don Cathedra for Church, Don Gifaro for Sanford Gifford (1823-1880), Herr Rubens for Horace Robbins (1842-1904), M. de Woods for Lockwood de Forest (1850-1932), and, for himself, the alias Mr. Arbor Ilex. In addition to the artists and the author, another companion, M. De La Rose, and five guides completed the group.

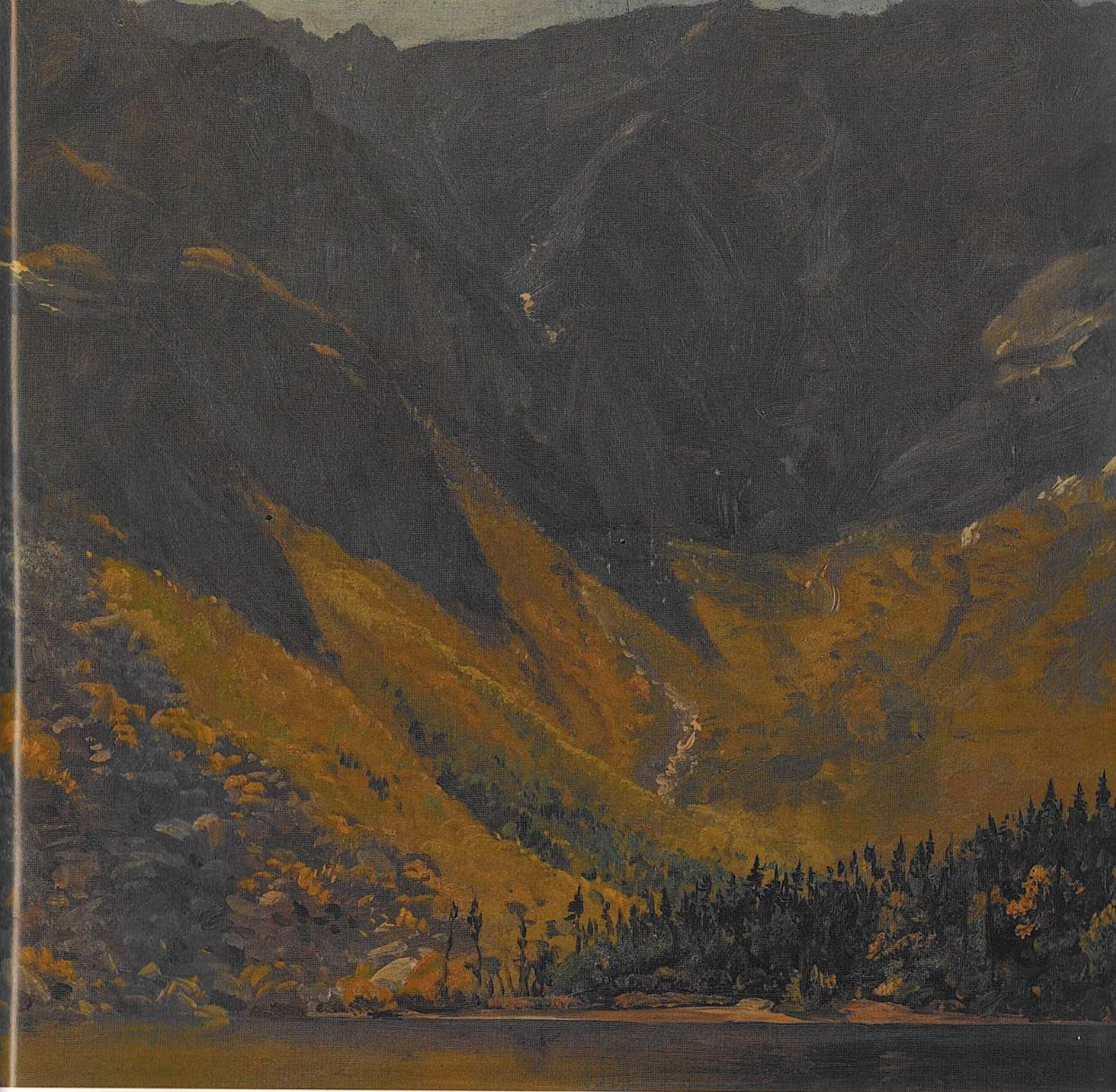
The article begins with a declaration that the trip will have a decidedly different tone than Thoreau's, as described in that writer's earlier account: "We shall not follow ... Thoreau in his intimate searches in forest life and frontier art and custom ... but try to present a practical view of camp life, with interspersions of tramp and camp incident and observation." Holley then provides a description of the camp accompanied by diagrams of the layout — guides' tent, main tent, and storehouse with table, forming three sides around the large campfire.

Church captured the scene in a nocturnal sketch. Visible in the glow of the fire, one of

the group rests at a tent's opening, while sparks drifting upward illuminate the surrounding tree trunks. An engraving of this Church work, augmented with additional figures, appears in the article.

Once Holley and the group settled into camp, they spent as much time enjoying fishing and canoeing as sketching. Church showed off his camping skills early in the trip by patching a leaky teapot with bird shot and an empty paint tube he had melted in a spoon over the fire. Later in their stay, he exhibited his culinary knowhow, baking a trout by wrapping it in buttered paper, burying it in ashes, and covering it with hot coals. The meticulous supplies list provided by Holley at the article's conclusion is dominated by potatoes, hard bread, beans, and mess pork, so Church's skill with the fish was surely welcomed by all.

Although Church clearly enjoyed the diversions and camaraderie that camping provided, for the artist, sketching was still paramount, the chief purpose of the trip. Holley portrays him as "still the same faithful student of nature." He



goes on to describe Church's artistic process: "I had the opportunity — a most interesting experience — of seeing Don Cathedra make many of his sketches, of observing the bold and rapid manner in which he caught all the characteristic colors and effects of the landscape."

The Grandest View

Church was not content with sketching only around the camp, and he set off with the younger artists, Robbins and de Forest, and two

guides for Mount Turner in search of "what the Don [Church] had imagined to be the grandest view of Ktaadin." For de Forest, who studied with Church in the early 1870s, the foray was less than successful; he stumbled back to camp, having lost the others. The rest of the party returned a day later with "stories of hard struggles over wind-falls and through tangled underwood" and the reward of "primeval forest, singular growths, dead trunks tumbled picturesquely together by the wind, great trees wreathing their

Great Basin, Mountain Katahdin, Maine

Frederic Edwin Church

1878, oil and traces of graphite on paperboard,

12 x 12 15/16 in.

Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, New York, Gift of Louis P. Church,

1917-4-632.

Photograph: Matt Flynn; Image Courtesy Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum / Art Resource, NY



Olana

The eminent Hudson River School painter Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900) designed Olana, his family home, studio, estate, and working farm, as an integrated environment embracing architecture, art, and landscape. Considered one of the most important artists' residences in the United States, Olana is a landmark of picturesque landscape gardening with a Persian-inspired house at its summit, embracing unrivaled panoramic views of the vast Hudson Valley.

The Olana Partnership

The Olana Partnership supports the conservation, preservation, and improvement of the Olana State Historic Site, which is open to the public throughout the year. Its mission is to inspire the public by preserving and interpreting Olana, and to create the most widely recognized artist's home and studio in the world, vibrant with the activity of students, visitors, and scholars.

roots around big boulders cushioned all over with mosses." Church illustrates the description with an oil sketch of stumps and trunks with green moss and orange lichen, and a background of bright vegetation. The subsequent engraving in Scribner's captures the tangle of trunk, but not the electric colors of the sunlit foliage.

Church made a number of similar woodland studies of the area, using pencil, gouache, and oil, as desired. Brown paper highlighted with white gouache shows the sun speckling the dense forest and delineates the birches. An oil of a similar subject captures the contrasting greens of the leaves and plants, and a hint at a distant mountaintop in the left corner. These sketches were not intended for public exhibition but instead became part of Church's great cache of plein air studies, potentially serving as reference works for studio paintings or, more likely in this instance, as personal mementoes of the adventure.

While the view of Katahdin from Mount Turner was not all the artist had hoped — he proclaimed it "grand, but not pictorial" — either on this or another trip to the region, he captured Katahdin's peak looking across

Wood Interior on Mount Turner

Frederic Edwin Church

c. 1877, oil and graphite on paper mounted on canvas, 12 5/16 x 20 5/16 in.

OL.1980.1869, Collection Olana State Historic Site

from the shores of Togue Lake. Instead of paper, he selected academy board, perhaps because it allowed for an elongated horizontal surface to capture the grandeur of the solitary mountain, as well as the great expanse of water that dominates the foreground. The entire group also climbed Katahdin for the view from above, reaching the Great Basin on the east side of the mountain on a "glorious" day. Holley wrote, "The Don made many studies, and worked diligently all day with pencil and brush." Farther along the hike, Church and one of the guides left the party to "explore the comparatively undiscovered North Basin" while the others gradually completed the ascent.

The author pens an amusing reference to his part in creating these sketches: "Don Cathedra and I sketched from morning to night, producing some of our finest studies. The Don manipulated the brush and the palette, to be sure, but as I held the umbrella

Forest Interior New Mount Katahdin

Frederic Edwin Church

September 1876, graphite and gouache on medium brown paper, 10 3/4 x 17 7/8 in.

OL.1977.185, collection Olana State Historic Site



and generally supervised the work, I feel justified in the foregoing use of the pronoun.” From Holley’s witty recounting, we know that the supplies the group brought with them included an umbrella, typical of those brought by artists into the field to provide shade as they sketched. While Holley outlines in some detail the necessary food and camping supplies, and the expected expenses involved with the trip, unfortunately he does not list art materials. We can surmise that they also brought along various painting supplies, paint boxes, and stools.


Some of the artistic output from the trip is documented in the article, illustrated by engravings after sketches done by everyone in the group — with, not surprisingly, the lion’s share of images afforded to Church. With the publication of the article, readers got to relive the group’s adventure and share in the communal spirit that marked these types of excursions. As Holley expressed, “Its relation of the day’s expe-

riences, and the lying at ease before the glowing camp-fire ... these are the scenes of which the memories will last like those of Katahdin itself.”

The Stevens Farm

The following year, Church purchased the Stevens Farm on the south shore of Millinocket Lake — the only property he ever owned besides Olana, the Persian-inspired house and 250-acre designed landscape he created near Hudson, New York. The Church family and invited friends would enjoy the new camp, hiking, fishing, and canoeing. Longtime friend and fellow artist Jervis McEntee (1828-1891) painted the rustic camp on one of his visits. Church continued to capture the surrounding scenery, primarily for his own pleasure. As was his practice throughout his career, he mounted a number of the sketches to canvas and framed them for display in his home, revealing both his passion for the region and his pride in these gem-like works.

A selection of the oil sketches from the 1877 adventure and other of Church’s images of Maine, including trips to Mount Desert, were recently cleaned and conserved for the exhibition *Maine Sublime*. The exhibition is on view in the Evelyn and Maurice Sharp Gallery at Olana from June 9 through October 31, 2013, and at the Cleveland Museum of Art from June through September 2014.

Holley’s article remained popular for many years and was reprinted several times. Today, the article is available to read online at: <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/s/scmo/index.html> 

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See more of Frederic E. Church’s views of Maine in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.