Thesis Proposal

The Hope of a Nation:
Frederic Edwin Church's
Our Banner in the Sky and Aurora Borealis

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"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased its joy; they rejoice before thee as with joy at the harvest..." – Isaiah 9:2-3

On April 28, 1861, the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher quoted this stirring scripture as part of his sermon to the congregation at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York.¹ Beecher’s speech, entitled “The National Flag” emphasized the symbolic and inspirational qualities embodied in the American flag. This passionate mixture of biblical insight with patriotic fervor stood as a profound reaction against the desecration of the American flag at Fort Sumter on April 13, 1861. Confederate rebels had led an assault on the fort for two days, overwhelming the ill-supplied Union troops, and ceasing fire only when the tattered American flag was finally lowered. This act, coupled with Major Robert Anderson’s humiliating defeat at Fort Sumter, spurred mass enlistment into the Union Army and ignited the American Civil War.² Beecher’s sermon, in which he extolled the inherent patriotic and religious symbolism emanating from the hallowed stars and stripes, helped to solidify the Union’s enflamed response to the South.

The wave of patriotism that swept through the North sparked a passionate veneration of the American flag. By early May, epic landscape painter Frederic Edwin Church completed one of his most critically acclaimed works, Our Banner in the Sky (Fig. 1). According to art historian Doreen Bolger Burke it was Church’s reading of Beecher’s sermon that prompted the creation of this unabashedly patriotic painting.

wherein the celestial flag materializes as stripes of crimson cloud and star-studded sapphire sky, waving over the darkened landscape. Four years later the artist completed his famous *Aurora Borealis* (Fig. 2), depicting the undulating northern lights above an Arctic landscape. The apparent symbolic content of both paintings recalls the moral lessons inherent in the work of his mentor, Thomas Cole, who infused *The Course of Empire* (Fig. 3) series with prophetic warnings of national destruction.\(^3\)

Undoubtedly inspired by Cole, Frederic Church deliberately used symbolic imagery in his 1848 painting, *To the Memory of Cole* (Fig. 4), a visual tribute to his mentor. Church symbolically placed Cole’s grave amidst the billowing clouds and radiating light that permeate the Catskill landscape to suggest that all of nature surrounds and mourns the body of Cole. Although indebted to Cole, unlike his mentor who, in *The Course of Empire*, employed classical history as a symbolic forum, Church used natural phenomena to express his own political and spiritual beliefs. Church perceived the ability of nature to employ its own allegorical sentiments without the distraction of figural narratives. The manipulated visual effects and overt symbolism in *Our Banner in the Sky* and *Aurora Borealis* are reminiscent of Cole’s emblematic program in *The Course of Empire*. Although *Our Banner in the Sky* and *Aurora Borealis* do not bear immediate resemblance to one another, let alone to the work of Thomas Cole, Gerald Carr suggests that it is conceivable to associate the meaning of the tattered semblance of a flag in *Our Banner in the Sky* with the quivering arc of colored light in *Aurora Borealis*, as symbolic representations of Church’s views on the Civil War.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) This interpretation is discussed in: Angela Miller, “Thomas Cole and Jacksonian America: The Course of Empire as Political Allegory,” *Prospects* 14 (1990), 65-92.

\(^4\) Carr, 277.
In this thesis I propose to argue that Church painted *Our Banner in the Sky* (1861) and *Aurora Borealis* (1865) to serve as visual bookends to the Civil War. I will argue that these two paintings reflect Church’s zealous political support for the Union cause as well as his fervent spiritual belief in the providential hand of God guiding the course of the war. During the same week that Church was working on *Our Banner in the Sky*, the New York Evening Post ran a story in which the Seventh Regiment of the United States Army crossed the Chesapeake Bay on their way to Washington D.C. As they marched, the soldiers saw the moon glisten with an aura of red, white and blue. This phenomenon was hailed as “a blessed omen” of Union victory. Additionally, at the exhibition of *Our Banner in the Sky* with Church’s famed *The Icebergs* in May of 1861, the accompanying brochure stated:

*The sudden and simultaneous outburst of patriotism... when the Flag of the country was insulted and the Government defied and betrayed, found no more hearty or instant response among any class of citizens than the Artists... One of the most characteristic and novel results of this patriotic enthusiasm which inspired the artists was a felicitous ‘study’ of morning clouds, by Frederick [sic] E. Church, wherein by a perfectly natural but ingenious stroke of skill and fancy he made the sun-lit vapors of the dawn and the lingering stars in the firmament wear the aspect of Our Banner in the Sky.*

As these expressions of patriotism and faith influenced Church’s thematic material, I will also draw comparisons both between *Our Banner in the Sky* and *Aurora Borealis* and

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5 Burke, 46.
Cole’s *The Course of Empire* (1836) to reveal Church’s acknowledged debt to the vision and instruction of Cole.7

Through an iconographic and contextual analysis of these works, I intend to demonstrate that both *Our Banner in the Sky* and *Aurora Borealis* represent the inspired patriotic and spiritual vision of Frederic Church which echoes contemporary Union sentiment and national religious beliefs. It has already been established that Protestant theology played an integral role in American art prior to the mid-nineteenth century. James F. Cooper commented on this:

*American nineteenth-century landscape painting during the years 1830–1860 was inextricably tied to Protestant theology. Church publications regularly discussed the arts, and the preeminent American arts journal of the time, The Crayon, treated the subject of religion and the arts as a central theme, beginning each issue with a biblical text on its cover page.*8

This interrelationship, which found its strongest expression in the work of the Hudson River School, was the backbone of Frederic Church’s artistic vision. His ideal worldview, inspired by the revered scientist Alexander Humboldt, saw the union of science, religion, nature and art.9

In support of my argument I will also examine contemporary reviews of his work as well as the political and cultural commentary of the 1860’s. In 1867, for instance, John Tuckerman said of *Aurora Borealis* that Church had “achieved so much in the way of representing light from the pure depths of the zenith to the brilliant radiance of the

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7 Burke, 45.
horizon, we may anticipate for him new and remarkable triumphs in the more evanescent phenomena dependent on electric causes.”

I will argue that the iconographic motifs that Church employed in *Aurora Borealis* are directly related to a unique display of the northern lights that millions of Americans in the North witnessed on December 24, 1864. Herman Melville, the author of *Moby Dick*, declared that this spectacle was a symbol of triumph and peace for the Union, extolling nature’s promises to America’s singular destiny.

This study is significant in that it intends to present another interpretation of Frederic Church’s contextual intent in *Our Banner in the Sky* and *Aurora Borealis*. As will be revealed, these paintings embody Church’s vision to depict the sovereignty of the Union, the Divine prophecy of Union victory and the destructive results of war that lead to the need for rebirth in the aftermath of the conflict. These paintings express the sentiments, not only of the artists, but also the Union. Church’s faith and patriotism were shared by many nineteenth century Americans who, throughout the war, sustained themselves on the hope of divine providence. *Our Banner in the Sky* and *Aurora Borealis* reveal the faith of a people struggling through the loss of war to find salvation for themselves and their country.

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10 Howat, 121.
11 Huntington, 62.
Figure 1
Frederic Edwin Church, *Our Banner in the Sky*, Oil on board, 1861

Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, San Francisco

Figure 2
Frederic Edwin Church, *Aurora Borealis*, Oil on canvas, 1865

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D.C.
Figure 3
Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire*, Oil on canvas, 1836

The New-York Historical Society, New York
Figure 4
Frederic Edwin Church, *To the Memory of Cole*, Oil on Canvas, 1848
Bibliography


