

Frederic Edwin Church (United States, 1826-1900), *Mount Katahdin from Millinocket Camp*, 1895, oil on canvas, 26½ x 42¼ inches. Portland Museum of Art, Maine. Gift of Owen W. and Anna H. Wells in memory of Elizabeth B. Noyce, 1998.96.

As his last major studio painting, *Mount Katahdin from Millinocket Camp* sums up Frederic Edwin Church's remarkable career as a landscape painter. Church made his first ambitious inland expedition to the Mount Katahdin region of Maine in 1852, a journey he would repeat many times throughout his life. As the largest mountain in Maine, Mount Katahdin held a special place in the minds of Americans before the grandeur of the Rocky Mountains was fully realized. Church began his career as a landscape painter in the 1840s under the tutelage of Thomas Cole, the most famous American landscape painter of the time. As Cole's only official pupil, Church's early paintings reflected the influence of the Hudson River School. These early American landscape paintings fit with the European tradition of Romantic and moralizing scenes, where nature acts as metaphor for religious and nationalistic feelings. Nature served as evidence of God's divine creation, and landscape paintings celebrated God's presence on earth. Landscape paintings took on additional meaning and importance, however, as they represented a sense of pride, optimism, and potential felt by Americans because of the continent's vast natural resources. In 1845 the term "manifest destiny" was coined, giving a title to the belief that white men had a God-given right to progress, expansion, and the exploitation of natural resources. In this light, the popularity of landscape paintings in the mid-1800s was evidence of Americans' belief in their right to westward expansion and continuing encroachment on the land. The other side of this optimism was a concern for man's impact on nature, as Americans' recognized as early as in the 1830s that the natural world was threatened by progress and industrialization.

Church's painting skill was unmatched, as was his sense of adventure and daring. He painted broad, dynamic landscape views in an incredibly detailed, meticulous style, combining intimately observed minutiae with sweeping, breathtaking vistas. In addition to making the arduous journey into the woods of Maine to Mount Katahdin, Church also traveled all across the North and South American continents in search of ever more exotic locales. His paintings of the Andes Mountains and of icebergs in the Arctic Sea gave Americans a view of lands they couldn't even imagine. Church was a master promoter as well, displaying his monumental canvases in one-painting shows surrounded by artifacts collected on his journeys. Excited visitors would pay admission to see the one painting on view and to experience worlds they would never see in person. After a long and successful career, Church developed rheumatoid arthritis, which impeded but did not stop his painting. It took him five years to finish *Mount Katahdin from Millinocket Camp*. Upon its completion in 1895, he presented it to his wife, Isabel, on her 59th birthday. In a note dedicating the painting to his wife, Church wrote, "I am happy in the belief that owing to your generous, unselfish and cheerful nature the Autumn of your life will be beautiful in its brightness and color. Your old guide is paddling his cause in the shadow, but he knows that the glories of the Heavens and earth are seen more appreciatively when the observer rests in the shade." Lit by the glow of late afternoon sun, Katahdin's lavender summit rises into a golden cloudless sky, the distant shore and foothills aflame with autumn hues. Here, a lone man seated in a canoe in the shaded foreground represents the artist, himself near the close of his own voyage of life. Pausing in mid-oar stroke, he turns away from the viewer to the magnificent natural display in the distance.