

Art exhibits fill galleries at the Mattatuck

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Just before sunrise, in June 1859, Louis Legrand Noble, a minister and a poet, approached Cape Race, at the southeastern tip of the Avalon Peninsula, Newfoundland.

With him was America's most popular and successful painter, the son of ministers increasingly captivated by scientific advancements. Cape Race was a place known to explorers like these two; for 300 years or more, adventurers had threaded through, by or around it, in earnest-but-doomed hunts for the elusive

Northwest Passage.

But Noble and his shipmate, the painter Frederic Edwin Church, were not looking for trade routes, fur or gold mines. Their object was a monolith whose vast outlines pierced the cloaking fog.

"Icebergs! Icebergs!" Noble later wrote. "There they were, two of them, a large one and a smaller: the latter pitched upon the dark and misty desert of the sea like an Arab's tent; and the larger like a domed mosque in marble of a greenish white."

Icebergs, which Noble later described as "the dread of mariners and the wonder of the traveler," were the object of the pair's obses-

sion. Noble saw in their muscular terror an affirmation of his faith. Church saw majesty, monumentality and not incidentally money.

It's impossible to overstate the mania for Arctic visions in 19th century America. And Church, with one masterpiece, "Niagara," behind him and another "The Heart of the Andes," a blistering success, was looking for new subject matter.

The Mattatuck Museum's newest exhibit, "Icebergs!" represents part of Church's answer to that quest. It showcases an oil sketch not much bigger than a post card from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, likely painted on that 1859 voyage with Noble to

At right, Frederick Edwin Church, between 1855 and 1865.

BRADY-HANDY COLLECTION

Labrador and Newfoundland. It's not the size of the sketch or the large oil from the Mattatuck's collection that accompanies it, that accounts for its power. It's the fact that Church probably painted it while on the boat, in quick but certain strokes to showcase the splendor of this natural phenomenon that was becoming talismanic in the mid 19th century.

And, what do you know, they still are.

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CHURCH: Exhibit first of many to come

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"Icebergs" brings together a series of iceberg-related paintings, two by Church and three by his contemporary, William Bradford. The exhibit is the first part of a collaboration between the Mattatuck and the Museum of Fine Art, Boston, funded by a \$2 million grant to bring major American works of art to smaller institutions. As such, it portends more expansive exhibits to come. As it is, the plucky exhibit is a captivating reminder of the pivotal role Church, a Hartford native, played in the American imagination.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Icebergs!

WHERE: Mattatuck Museum, 144 West Main St., Waterbury

WHEN: Through Sept. 2

HOW: mattmuseum.org or call (203) 753-0381

It was the imagination that thirsted to be stoked in 19th century, in part because so many layers of the world's mysteries were being peeled back simultaneously. Advances in science, technology, archeology, optics and engineering were reshaping how humanity thought about its origins, its geography and its Biblical certitudes. Church found himself hip-deep in this protean world, the disciple of the devoutly religious Thomas Cole who saw landscape as evidence of God's majesty, and a devotee of the German explorer Alexander von Humboldt, whose "Cosmos" encouraged artists to travel to the heart of the natural world and record it with scientific precision.

Church, in other words, stood at the vortex between Empiricism and Romanticism and chose, as his language, a little bit of both.



MATTATUCK MUSEUM

'Icebergs' by Frederic E. Church, 1873

What that means for viewers is that they will see the Frederic Church who poured sufficient divine awe into his canvases to make the devout not only swoon, but avow their religious conviction. But they will also see a man in thrall to science, to the world as a rough, rugged and heroic place, waiting to be documented and scrutinized.

The two studies of icebergs exhibited here are a reminder of Church's preternatural skill, his staggering capacity to inscribe sky with a beatific swell, his ability to marry accuracy and elegy in the same canvas. Even in a tiny painting like the MFA's, Church's facility with the citrus-salmon light that soaks the iceberg is breathtaking. The Mattatuck's work, which is slightly bigger, is a darker, horizontal work. Here the ocean is a still, mahogany brown and the grizzled, leaden iceberg to the left looks less like ice than a craggy granite outcropping. It's the anomalous iceberg that gets you; the way it stabs the sky with arresting authority, a slender blue stripe ribboning through the glacial white, the remarkable effect of light on the blinding snow.

For Church, the glacier was both stark canvas and freakish sublimity. It was everything the folks back home wanted fantastical and

exquisite, overwhelming and petrifying. The sublime was the terrifying seen from a position of safety, to use Edmund Burke's definition, and when Church unveiled it pulling back black curtains in a gas-lit auditorium, it must have been cinematic in its power and exotic in its subject. Though most Americans would never see a glacier, the fear of them, slicing through ships on which many American workers still toiled, would have been palpable.

It's tantalizing to wonder how each of the men on that expedition would have experienced such phenomenon. For Noble, a glacier was unequivocal evidence of the divine hand. As he wrote; "(T)his is all God's own world, which he holdeth in the hollow of his hand, is manifest from the impartial bestowal of beauty. No apple, peach or rose is more within one network of sweet, living grace, than the round world."

Church's attitudes might have been less rapturous and more empirical. He was increasingly drawn to capture the breadth of the natural world with scientific precision. Indeed, his later depictions of Jerusalem and the Middle East were criticized for being too precise and insufficiently artistic. He had gone to the Andes largely at Humboldt's assertion that all

the world could be seen at this one location. It's difficult not to admire Church's peripatetic curiosity; While in South America, he traveled 600 miles up the Magdalena River and spent days on a mule to see volcanoes in the Andes.

Church's ultimate masterpiece, "The Icebergs," an operatic crescendo now at the Dallas Museum of Art, was exhibited in 1861, by which time the United States had descended into Civil War. Church didn't mince words or allegiances. When he exhibited the work publicly, he renamed it "The North Church's Picture of Icebergs," and allocated his exhibition fees to support soldiers' dependents.

The Mattatuck's exhibit helpfully contains other painters' images of icebergs, including the self-taught William Bradford (1823-1892), whose canvases tend more toward Luminism. To look at a painter like Bradford in the context of Church is to see the superior painter's uncanny mastery of light, composition and brushwork. Bradford captures the rocky shore and fishing vessels well, but his compositions are pallid and formulaic compared to Church's.

The exhibit's other winner is Lynn Davis' enormous black and white photograph of a glacier from 2004. To see this ice formation, hollowed out like an enormous conch shell is to witness warming seas with a vividness that is as gut-wrenching as it is gorgeous. Perhaps this is the 21st century's version of the sublime: The spectacular erosion of the world as an awkward-yet-commanding aesthetic beauty. Is the splendor of decay and loss as forceful as those of majesty and permanence? That's one of the many inevitable questions confronting viewers in this small but compelling exhibit at the Mattatuck.