

The Effect of Light in Frederic Edwin Church's painting *El Khasne, Petra* (1874).

Frederic Edwin Church's *El Khasne, Petra*, portrays Al-Khazneh (Treasury), a temple (or tomb)¹ in the ancient rock city of Petra, Jordan. Executed in 1874, Church uses light and shadow to emphasize the dramatic setting and inspire wonder. Dark rock walls on either side of the painting create a sense of claustrophobia, forcing the viewers' eyes upward towards the rock-cut temple of Petra, a structure suffused with golden light.

The relatively bare and simple landscape in *El Khasne* marked a significant departure from Church's typical works that depicted panoramic scenes of lush, vibrant wilderness. Church was a popular painter of the Hudson River School, a group of nineteenth century artists known for their grandiose paintings of American wilderness. Like other Hudson River School painters, Church's sublime landscapes attempted to forge a uniquely American form of art that fostered national identity by portraying vast regions of American territory.² Church, however, pushed the limits of mid-century landscape art by depicting natural scenes located outside the boundaries of the United States, while still drawing a link between the distant land and the American nation. Light was one of the most important elements he used to portray national spirit. Gerald L. Carr, an art historian with several books on Church³, explains that "[t]he thing that most energized Church as an artist was light. It is apparent in all his finished paintings, outdoor studies, and studio canvases." Light in Church's paintings has a self-illuminating quality so that the canvas

¹ Jordan Tourism Board, "Petra," Jordan Tourism Board, <http://www.visitjordan.com/default.aspx?tabid=63>.

² Frances K. Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2002), 135.

³ Berry-Hill Galleries, "Consultant and Author of the Frederic E. Church Catalogue Raisonne," Berry-Hill, <http://www.berry-hill.com/about/GLcarr.html>

seems to glow with its own internal light. Carr describes this aesthetic phenomenon as one in which “[l]ight splashes his painted surfaces, and radiates, or seems to radiate from beneath them.”⁴ This self-illumination has a striking effect, suggesting transcendence and the inherent spiritual power of the natural world.

Light came to play a different role in Church’s later works; rather than evoking community, Church’s use of light emphasized a subjective experience that encouraged melancholy introspection.

The sweeping landscapes celebrating American identity that characterized Church’s early work shifted during the 1860s. America’s descent into Civil War left Church disillusioned;⁵ and although Church painted landscapes until the end of his life in 1900, the tone of his work in the latter part of the nineteenth century shifted away from triumphant nationalism. *El Khasne, Petra* is one of the paintings that emerged from this post-Civil War mentality that de-emphasized a community vision. His earlier works rarely included human figures or manmade structures, but paintings executed from the late 1860s and onward focused less on the natural landscape and more on the human element, particularly ruins. This is not to say that Church abandoned the landscape, it remained central to his style and content; yet, these later landscapes are characterized by a despondent, versus an exultant tone. The mental shift Church experienced did not change his artwork altogether, as Church continued to demonstrate a dedication to the dramatic interplay of light, color, and shadow to create beautiful and awe-inspiring scenes.

In contrast to his early work, light in *El Khasne* evokes a subjective experience rather than an all-encompassing vision of nationhood. Replacing the bird’s-eye vantage point of his

⁴ Gerald L. Carr, *Frederic Edwin Church: Romantic Landscapes and Seascapes* (New York: Adelson Galleries, 2007), 66.

⁵ John Davis, *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1996), 172.

other paintings, *El Khasne* situates the viewer in the narrow foreground. The extreme verticality created by the dark canyon walls induces discomfort, which is only relieved by the slim entrance into the open sunlight at the foot of the temple. In his book examining the relationship between imagery and nineteenth century American religion and nationalism, John Davis argues that “[t]he structure of *El Khasne, Petra* replicates a state of anxiety and anticipation. The glowing temple offers itself as a kind of visual escape, the need to move forward to the light becoming all but irresistible.”⁶ The uncomfortable narrowness created in the foreground intensifies the effect of the light; the bright walls revealed between the canyon provide relief from the darkness, but not an escape from the discomfort of the scene. The light is brilliant, but also blinding.

The colors of Al-Khazneh⁷ (the tomb-temple) also contribute to the powerful effects of the light in the painting. Instead of a busy arrangement of colors, Al-Khazneh’s surface is plain, adorned only by the angles, lines, and curves of temple’s architecture. However, the pale yellow-brown of Petra’s walls amplify the golden effect of the sunlight, creating a feeling of transcendence. In a letter to his friend, E.D. Palmer, Church asks him to “imagine this fairy like Temple blazing like sunlight amongst those savage black rocks.”⁸

This interaction between sunlight and the plain walls of the rock-cut edifice pushes viewers toward a personal, spiritual revelation. The harsh brightness of the sun reflecting off of the exterior of Al-Khazneh mutes the details of the temple. Figures cut between the pillars are discernible, but barely distinguishable. One cannot tell exactly what each image represents, while the finer features of the column capitals are drowned into vague swirls. In suppressing the

⁶ Davis, *The Landscape of Belief*, 196.

⁷ The painting’s title, *El Khasne* is actually a misspelling of the tomb-temple’s real name, Al-Khazneh. Church probably gave a phonetic spelling of the building.

⁸ Frederic E. Church to E.D. Palmer, Jaffa—Palestine, 10 March 1868. Quoted in Kevin J. Avery, *Treasures from Olana: Landscapes by Frederic Edwin Church* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 2005), 55.

temple's details, the light becomes a spiritual force in the painting, overwhelming the viewer so that personal identity is subsumed within a larger divine power.

This loss of the viewer's identity within a higher power was a significant aspect of Church's artwork immediately following the Civil War. Religious themes had always been a key component of his work, but after the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, Church experienced a religious crisis, which he sought to mitigate by visiting Biblical sites in the Middle East. The paintings that came out of this trip, including *El Khasne*, engaged with theology in a different way than before. Church's panoramic wilderness scenes paralleled the grand, imposing power of God, the viewer is supposed to draw peace and comfort from a God-imbued landscape. In *El Khasne*, the viewer is meant to feel blinded and isolated. The deep shadowed canyon before the city is lonely, even the small human figures on the left side of the canvas do nothing to alleviate the solitude of the viewer's experience. Instead, the figures heighten the sense of isolation. The two men are located far back in the canvas, away from the implicit viewer, leaving the onlooker deserted. Like the decorative figures on Al-Khazneh, their features are indistinguishable. Blurred into darkness rather than light the painting's observer cannot connect with these shadowed figures. By turning them away from the entrance to Petra, they appear unconcerned with the transcendent light behind them, leaving the viewer alone in their spiritual revelation.

Light in Church's *El Khasne, Petra* acts as spiritual force, provoking a personal experience of the ancient rock city in Jordan. Contrasted with Church's serene and sublime wilderness landscapes, light in this painting marks a departure from the transcendent nationalism in his early artwork. *El Khasne* is both transcendent and disquieting; the constricted space opening into dazzling sunlight paralleling the artist's own experience of Petra.

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