

Niagara, The Table Rock—Winter

One of North America's most celebrated natural wonders, Niagara Falls in the 19th century came to symbolize the magnitude and power of the New World. The French missionary Father Louis Hennepin, traveling with French explorer René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, was one of the first Europeans to view the spectacular sight and write of it. His 1698 travel book, *A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*, offered readers the first visual image of Niagara: an engraving by an anonymous Dutch artist (who actually had not seen the falls). Hennepin, clearly terrified at the sight of the 160-foot-high falls, estimated the drop at an exaggerated 600 feet. He recounted waters that "foam and boil" in a fearful manner and the "horrible Precipice" that confronts the viewer at the top of the falls.¹

After 1760 portrayals of the falls became more frequent and more accurate. Throughout the 1800s artists and writers extolled Niagara's beauty and majesty, and visitors flocked to witness its spectacular power. Their patriotic fervor—linked to the concept of Manifest Destiny and the belief that such magnificence was a divine gift bestowed on the chosen nation—would continue until the Pan-American Exposition of 1901, when the tremendous energy of the falls was harnessed for hydroelectricity.

Niagara, which forms a portion of the international border between the United States and Canada, actually comprises two separate waterfalls. Goat Island splits its cataract into the American Falls in New York State and the Horseshoe, or Canadian, Falls in Ontario. The 45 million gallons that flow per minute over the precipice are now controlled through an international agreement, with water diverted for hydroelectric power. Today Horseshoe Falls is eroding at a rate of approximately 1 foot every 10 years—faster than the American Falls—owing to the greater volume of water that flows over it.

François Régis Gignoux arrived in the United States from France in 1840 and opened a studio in Brooklyn, New York. A student of Paul Delaroche and schooled in the history of European art, Gignoux acquired a manner and a collection of technical shortcuts that allowed him to paint landscapes secondhand from prints and other paintings, employing his own imaginative additions. Gignoux wisely took the landscape in winter as his principal subject, becoming the only well-known member of the Hudson River School painters to concentrate on that season. He did so with considerable charm and, in this particular instance, picturesque romanticism.

Gignoux in all probability would have visited Niagara, the New World's most famous landscape spectacle, before beginning his series of paintings of the falls. Skilled as he was in technical shortcuts, however, he would not have gone tramping about in the cold snow and dangerous ice to make sketches from nature as Frederic Church would do in 1856 in preparation for his 1857 *Niagara*. Instead, when preparing his landscape (the first large painting of the falls in winter ever made), Gignoux would have selected his view—or rather, composition—and painted it according to pictorial formulas.

The viewpoint is a suspended one, well below Table Rock, but well above an icy shelf upon which three widely spaced figures are seen. The nearest one, an artist, and by clever implication Gignoux himself, carries a staff and a portfolio. Table Rock—dark brown, shadowed, and deeply undercut—looms over the picture, even over the falls itself, in an ominous, nearly animate way. The steel-gray sky sits on the rim of the chilly blue-green "water sheet." Most remarkable is the visionary ice cathedral that rises from the bottom of the canvas. This artistic invention is meant to attest to the presence of God and the accessibility of faith and hope through the invocation of the medieval Gothic cathedral. Rising toward the threatening overhang of rock and the glowering sky, the ice cathedral is given a specifically American nationalistic inflection by the huge eagle flying toward it out of the luminous mists. It is perhaps doubtful that Gignoux intended any specific reference to current political and social tensions, but his choice of Table Rock as a omen of potential disaster was nonetheless appropriate. In 1850, as the United States crept closer and closer to civil war, the giant table finally collapsed into the abyss.

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François Régis Gignoux (1816–1882)

Oil on canvas, ca. 1847

52½ x 36⅛ inches (133.4 x 91.8 cm)

Signed (lower right corner): R. Gignoux.

Gift of Caroline Carroll in memory of her husband, Charles Carroll, 1901

Accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library, 1901

Cat. no. 33.00020



Table Rock, a massive ledge jutting out over Horseshoe Falls, provided an ideal vantage point for early 19th-century tourists. The pointed outcropping was formed as water slowly eroded the soft underlayer of rock, leaving the denser top layer intact. After centuries of continued erosion, pieces of Table Rock began falling off, first in 1818, and again in 1828 and 1829. On June 26, 1850, the giant table fell into the river, leaving the site a ruin now memorialized in paintings and written accounts. When it finally collapsed, the ledge was reported to have been 200 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 100 feet thick.

Colonel Charles Carroll of Maryland acquired Gignoux's *Niagara, The Table Rock—Winter* shortly after its execution. Caroline Carroll, his widow, left instructions upon her death that the painting should be donated to the U.S. government. Alice Louisa Thompson, Caroline Carroll's sister, presented the painting to Congress on her behalf; it was accepted by the Joint Committee on the Library on March 2, 1901.

Gignoux exhibited frequently in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. He was a member of the National Academy of Design and the first president of the Brooklyn Art Academy. Gignoux exhibited *Niagara, The Table Rock—Winter* at the National Academy in 1847. In the Corcoran Gallery of Art's 1985 exhibition catalogue *Niagara*, Jeremy Elwell Adamson wrote of the Senate's painting: "Few nineteenth-century portrayals of Niagara match the Gothic horror of this gloomy, ice-girt depiction."¹ Gignoux painted four wintertime scenes of Niagara as well as a summertime view. His *Niagara Falls in Winter* (1858) was exhibited in 1859 along with Frederic Church's monumental view of Niagara. Gignoux's works were considered highly collectible during his day, and several of his winter paintings were reproduced and circulated as engraved prints. The artist returned to France in 1870, where he died 12 years later.



