

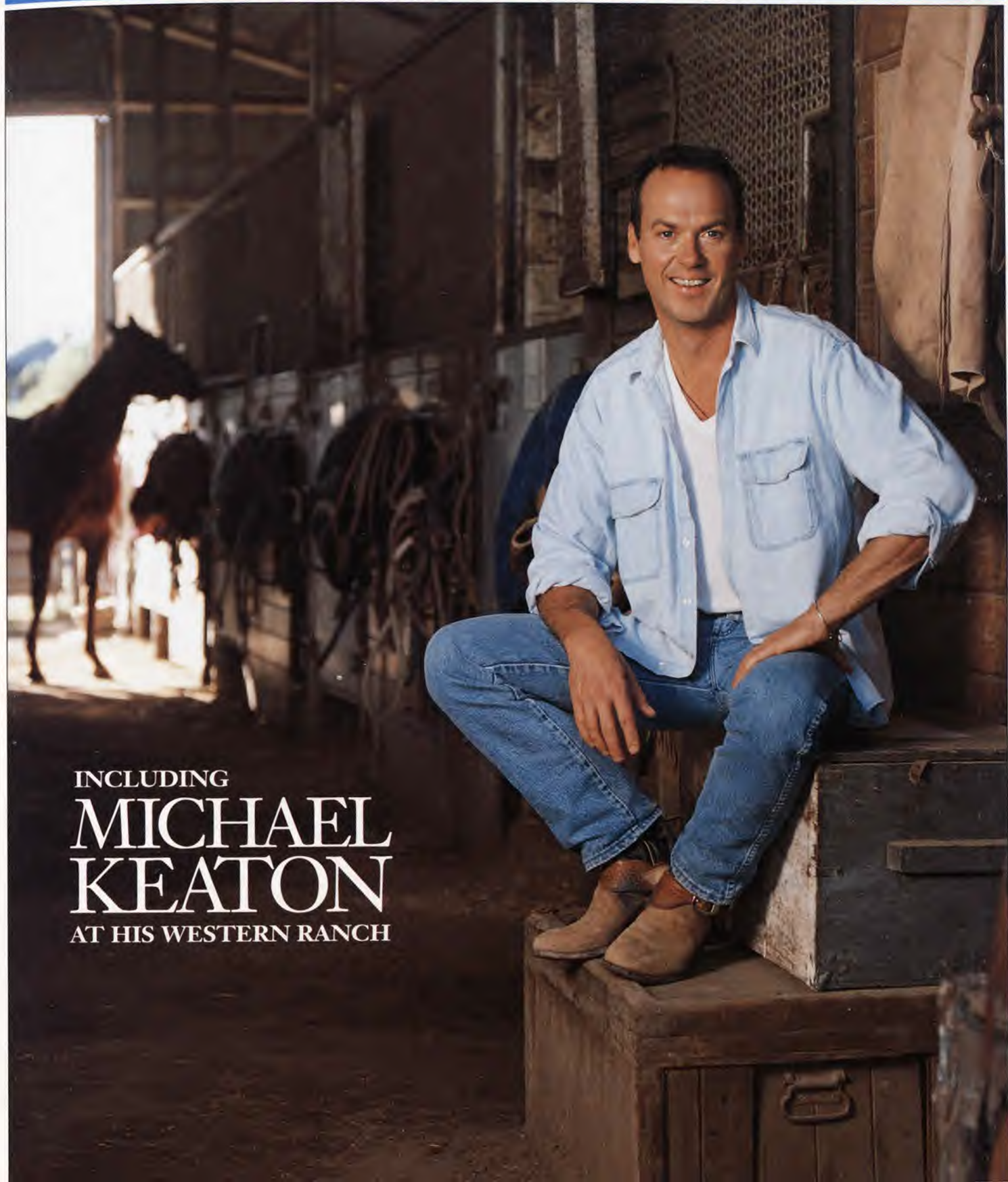
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FREDERIC CHURCH AT OLANA

AN ARTIST'S FANTASY ON THE HUDSON RIVER



Text by John Ashbery
Photography by Alec Marshall

ABOUT AN HOUR THIS side of Albany is the Center of the World—I own it,” wrote the painter Frederic Church to his friend the sculptor Erastus Dow Palmer in 1869. The site he referred to was a two-hundred-and-fifty-acre tract of land where Church was soon to begin building Olana, a Moorish-style mansion on a bluff overlooking the Hudson River some two hours by train north of New York City. The design and construction of the estate would be the culminating creative act of Church’s career, occupying him from 1860 until 1900, the year of his death. By that time Church, crippled by arthritis, had all but ceased to paint, and his once towering reputation was ebbing. Olana was his final masterpiece.

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the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Taconic Region, and a New York State Historic Site since 1966, the house and its surroundings are being carefully restored to their appearance

circa 1891 to 1900 under the guidance of manager James A. Ryan, whose dedication to this task recalls the devoted hero in such Henry James stories as “The Aspern Papers” and “The Altar of the Dead.” (Ryan speaks of “Mr.

In the 1870s, inspired by his travels to Europe and the Middle East, American landscape painter Frederic Edwin Church designed Olana, his Hudson Valley residence. ABOVE LEFT AND LEFT: The east façade.

TOP AND ABOVE: “I am obliged to imagine Persian architecture,” wrote Church, who created Olana’s fanciful arches and polychrome decoration. Now a New York State Historic Site, the property is being carefully restored.

Church” in a tone that suggests the master has just stepped out of the room for a moment.) Church’s original gilt-and-polychrome stenciling is being re-created on the building’s many cornices and

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FREDERIC CHURCH AT OLANA



LEFT: At the center of the house is the Court Hall, whose Islamic arches are adorned with colors mixed on Church's palette. He mixed Oriental carpets with pieces from the Middle East, the Americas and India.

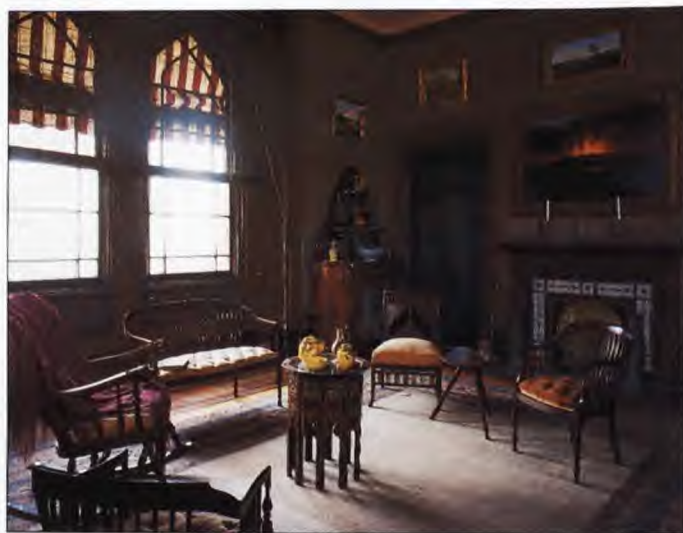
Though Calvert Vaux served as the supervising architect, Olana seemed to spring directly from Church's imagination. BELOW: Church's 1867 *The Afterglow* is displayed in the East Parlor.

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its columned piazza. Twentieth-century "improvements" to the grounds (such as a formal rose garden with brick paths) have been removed, and hundreds of trees have been planted to replace those that Church's son and daughter-in-law had cut down to open out the view from the house to the lake below or that were destroyed in the 1938 hurricane.

To understand this remarkable residence and the somewhat patriarchal tone in which Church announced his annexation of "the Center of the World," one must look first at the man and his work. Frederick Edwin Church (he would drop the *k* from his first name in his twenties) was born to affluence in Connecticut in 1826; overcoming parental objections, he studied for two years with the English-born painter Thom-

as Cole, who was famous for dramatic, moralizing landscapes. Cole lived in Catskill, directly across the Hudson from the future site of Olana. Having sketched the view from "his" hill as a youth, Church returned there some fifteen years later after looking in vain elsewhere for a setting for what he would later call his "Feudal Castle... under the modest name of a dwelling-house."

By that time Church had achieved a celebrity never accorded an American artist before or since. Thousands queued up outside his New York studio to pay a hefty twenty-five-cent admission fee to view vast panoramic paintings like *Niagara* and *The Heart of the Andes*; the latter was sold for ten thousand dollars in 1859, then the highest price ever paid for a landscape in America. An American critic called *The*



Heart of the Andes "the finest painting ever painted in this century, and one of the best ever painted," while in England the *Daily News* announced that "Turner himself, in wildest imagination, never painted a scene of greater magnificence." And, standing before *Niagara*, the renowned French academic

painter and teacher Jean-Léon Gérôme grudgingly conceded: "*Ça commence lâ-bas*." Even as late as 1871 they stood "six deep" in front of Church's *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives*.

Those were the years of Manifest Destiny, when the lush, sparsely peopled land-

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scapes of America were taken as a sign of God's special benevolence toward the fledgling nation and a symbol of the spiritual and material blessings about to fall like manna on its people. Then the Civil War intervened; the mood of the country turned bitter, and as early as 1865 artistic backlash set in. Sublimity went rapidly out of style, and Church and his colleagues found themselves derisively dubbed the Hudson River School. (It seems strange today that this term, like Impressionism, was originally meant to be pejorative.) Genre pictures, the Barbizon School and the more plain-spoken landscapes of Winslow Homer suited the post-Reconstruction period better than Church's rapt



ABOVE RIGHT: The artist planned the sitting room around his *El Khasne, Petra*, which is over the fireplace. Other of his works join a large Thomas Cole oil, right. The embroidered cloth is from the city of Rasht.

RIGHT: To satisfy his desire for "one old room, with ... old pictures," Church created the cloisterlike picture gallery/dining room. With Lockwood de Forest, he designed the brass-and-teak fireplace, which was made in India.



panoramas. He had to wait until late in this century for rehabilitation: *The Icebergs*, discovered by chance at a boys' school in England, set a record for an American painting (just as *The Heart of the Andes* had over a hundred years before) when it was purchased for two and a half million dollars in 1979 and donated to the Dallas Mu-

seum of Art; and Church loomed over his contemporaries in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's "American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School" show in 1987. The 1989-90 Church retrospective at the National Gallery of Art in Washington confirmed his standing as one of the preeminent nineteenth-century

American landscape painters.

As his reputation waned, Church devoted his energies increasingly to elaborating his fairy-tale fiefdom. ("I have made about one and three-quarters miles of roads this season, opening entirely new and beautiful views—I can make more and better landscapes in this way than by tampering with canvas and

paint in the studio," he wrote to his friend Palmer in 1884, perhaps with a hint of regret.) In 1861 he began living more or less full time at a cottage, later named *Cosy Cottage*, built from plans by Richard Morris Hunt below the summit where the house now stands. He went on to construct a separate studio and various outbuildings while assembling the parcels of land that today make up the estate. After the hilltop was secured, Church and his wife, Isabel, embarked in 1867 on what was to become an eighteen-month voyage to Europe and the Middle East. By that time the property included a working farm and a "landscape garden" with an artificial lake and thousands of trees planted on what had only recently been raw farmland.

Apparently, Church had hired Hunt to draw up plans for a large house above the

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FREDERIC CHURCH AT OLANA



LEFT: Remaining much as it was, Church's studio was where he captured views of the Hudson Valley landscape. At right is a religious scene that he painted in 1847. BELOW LEFT: Church in about 1870.

The views from Olana and the countryside itself were for Church as important as the house's interiors. BELOW: The southwest façade includes the studio wing and observatory, left, which he completed in 1891.



COURTESY OLANA STATE HISTORIC SITE

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Hudson, and the architect had proposed both an Italianate mansion with “Persian” touches and a “French manor.” On his return, however, Church commissioned Calvert Vaux (Frederick Law Olmsted’s collaborator on

Central Park) to come up with something in the “Middle Eastern” style. Ultimately the design was largely Church’s (about three hundred of his architectural sketches and numerous letters relating to the construction survive). Vaux’s role was that of engineer; his

structural and design knowledge allowed Church’s ideas to take shape.

In a letter from the Middle East, Church had praised flat-roofed houses surrounding a central court with patterned marble pavements; Olana has these features, which, of

course, were adapted to the harsher climate of upstate New York. The east façade, which greets the visitor, is a vast masonry wall pierced at ground level only by an ogival entrance and a narrow window, conferring a sense

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of mystery and inaccessibility on the oriels and balconies above. The south façade, which looks down the river, is more hospitable. A "piazza" of slim gilt pillars connects the main mass of the house (dominated by a tower with a truncated pyramidal roof and an observation platform whose balustrade has finials in the form of teapots) to a smaller pavilion, built at the edge of the cliff, which contained Church's studio and an observatory above it. The ensemble is breathtaking, and despite the proliferation of architectural elements and polychrome tile decoration, it is not busy but solemn and wildly fanciful, like Church's painting.

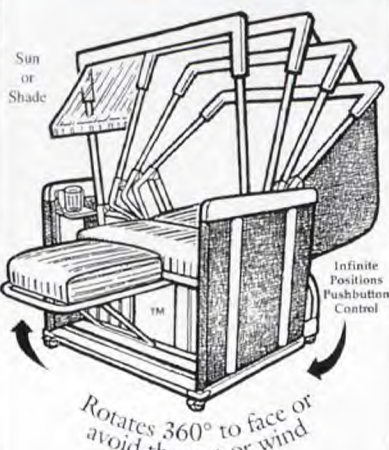
Once inside the vestibule, one looks straight down a one-hundred-foot vista to the studio, where a huge plate-glass window trimmed with Islamic fretwork frames the distant trees on the west bank of the Hudson. The first-floor plan is more or less Palladian, with four rooms radiating off a large central hall that Church unabashedly called the Court Hall. Cluttered with comfortable furniture and collections of treasures such as Persian armor; Chinese and Japanese pictures; a Mexican Madonna; mounted birds of paradise, quetzals and iridescent butterflies; and two life-size bronze cranes perched atop turtles, this is the spiritual center of the house. At the bottom of the stairway is a raised platform that was used as a stage for amateur theatricals. Dramatic entrances were possible from left and right and down from the landing; kilims hung from a brass rod could close off the stage. Turning to the right, one can see the distant panorama of the Catskills to the west. Straight ahead the view is to the south, through a room called the Ombra, a kind of shadow-box parlor whose window focuses the seemingly infinite downriver perspective. It is as though a moral and aesthetic lesson (on the order of Hopkins's line "The world is charged with the grandeur of God") was being wordlessly expounded.

Throughout the house, a complicated and subtle scheme of surface patterns and interrelated colors, which Church himself mixed on his palette, draws one forward. The strongest color is a rich,

mutated purple that appears in the entrance hall and is taken up later in the stencils of the Court Hall and the sitting room. The calm gray of the walls of the formal reception room is heightened by the silver arabesques ornamenting its doors. (Both the gold and silver of the stenciling are tarnished by time, since Church used powdered bronze and aluminum to obtain them, but when new they glittered enough to cause a reporter to exclaim: "One feels as if transported into the orient when surrounded by so much of Eastern magnificence.") The salmon color in the arches of the Court Hall reappears in the pink-marble fire surround in the sitting room and, above it, in Church's painting of the pink-sandstone temple of El Khasne at Petra—the one important picture of his that he kept at Olana.

Naturally, the house is chiefly oriented toward the west and south to take advantage of the views, but, strangely for an artist, north light seems to have bothered him. Though his studio does have a high north window, the room gazes longingly westward. A number of windows, including the north-facing ones of the staircase landing, are fitted with amber-tinted glass against which cutout-paper latticework is silhouetted, as though the house's owner felt the northern light of the Hudson Valley clashed with Moorish sensuousness. In the picture gallery/dining room, vaguely medieval with its gray-green-and-maroon-plastered walls, brass-and-teak fireplace and mixed bag of heavily framed "old master" paintings (acquired by Church in Europe and hung here to create the atmosphere of a room "toned down to 400 years back," in his words), the north-facing windows are too high to afford a view. The room was meant for evening use, when the artist could play lord of the manor at the long and beautifully appointed banquet table. On the second floor (not open to the public), the Moorish motifs extend to the bedroom suites of Mr. and Mrs. Church, though these private rooms were never as elaborately decorated as the reception rooms on the first floor. The most remarkable feature

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FREDERIC CHURCH

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there is the south window of Isabel Church's bedroom—a large, single pane framed in amber glass to give the impression of a changing painting of the view downriver.

For a long time the name Olana was thought to be a translation of sorts of an Arabic word meaning "our place on high"—a definition first quoted in an 1890s *Boston Herald* article and accepted ever since. However, art historian Gerald Carr, author of the 1994 catalogue raisonné of Church's work, found the name in a volume by the Greek geographer Strabo, a Christmas gift from Isabel Church to her husband in 1879 that is still in his library. There the word is cited as the name of a fortified treasure house on a hillside in Artaxata, an ancient Mesopotamian city that was one of the supposed sites of the Garden of Eden. Doubtless this was the meaning Church had in mind: a fortress, to protect his fragile family (two children had died in infancy); a treasure house because it sheltered not just the glittering trophies he brought back from his

The ensemble is not busy but solemn and wildly fanciful, like Church's painting.

travels but that family itself—his wife and their four surviving children. According to James Ryan, it was in this sense that the house was, for Church, a work of art in just the way he meant his paintings to be: a noble artifact designed to instill notions of artistic and moral superiority. To this end Olana still raises its proud, but not haughty, bulk high above the admittedly grander spectacle of the great river that inspired Church and his fellow artists, in the halcyon days when nature could still be read as a message of hope set down in God's cursive, unflinching hand. □

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