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NEWS

Exploring Olana's Central Park connection

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Hudson-Catskill Newspapers

Published: Monday, May 24, 2010 2:15 AM EDT

Print Page

HUDSON — Did you know that Frederic Church was a Commissioner of the New York City Department of Parks? Or that he sited Cleopatra's Needle, the famous Egyptian obelisk in Central Park, during his tenure as a commissioner?

Although he's a treasured historical figure in the Hudson Valley and in the art world, the connections between Church and Central Park in New York City aren't often discussed. There's so much to talk about when it comes to Church, and Olana, and the Hudson River School of Painters, and ideologies of the late 19th century, that this specific aspect of his life is not brought firmly into focus.

That's why the Olana Partnership, New York City's Morgan Library and Museum, the Central Park Conservancy, and the Foundation for Landscape Studies are partnering to present a lecture at the Morgan Library May 26 called "Great Romantic Landscapes: Central Park and Frederic Church's Olana."

Visitors to Olana may have noticed a model of Cleopatra's Needle, made by Tiffany, on display in the house.

"It's a very important thing that most people in the area don't notice," said Mark Prezorski, a member of the Olana Partnership's board and chairman of the viewshed advisory committee. "It's significant that he kept it permanently displayed."

A panel of experts, including Olana's new Landscape Curator Katherine H. Kerin, will explore this connection. Olana and Central Park were created during the same time period, with the same aesthetic: that landscapes have the power to reflect and shape public consciousness.

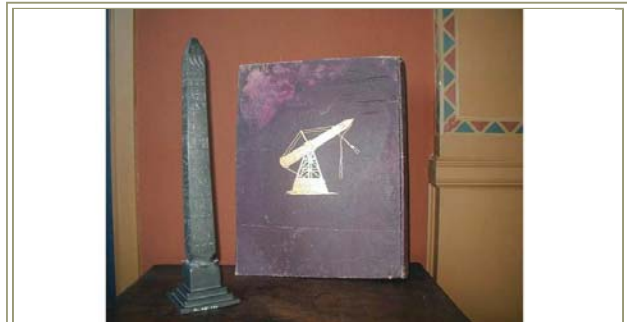
Obviously, Central Park's vast, 843-acre expanse and Olana's picturesque, 250-acre property are not physically similar. "But the historical similarities are there," said Kerin.

"The ideas, the aesthetics — they're all coming out of the same movement...the meadows, the woods, the rocks, the water, how moving through the space takes you through all those elements. That's really what both sites are about."

The term used in the period, Kerin said, was "the sublime": "it's really a stylized version of nature. There was a big moralizing component — people were supposed to be improved personally from viewing landscape like that."

"You were supposed to see the hand of God at work," Kerin continued. "(It was) a celebration of nature, but tweaking it, to make it sort of an idealized version."

The Romantic era wanted to express nature's true beauty with winding paths that expose viewers to



A replica of Cleopatra's Needle, made by Tiffany and Company, on display at Olana. Frederic Church helped site the obelisk at Central Park. (Contributed photo)

multiple elements, contemplative, sanctuary-like areas, and awe-inspiring views, instead of the gridded symmetry of formal gardens favored by earlier movements. The Romantic view dominated European thought in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Church, who was also a founding member of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was a celebrity of his time. When looked at from the perspective of Olana only, "he just seems like that guy that lived on top of the hill here," Kerin said. But in his 20s, "he was literally the most famous artist in America — it was a meteoric rise in the art world."

In the first years of Olana, when it was still a working farm, Kerin said the Church family was proud the farm could turn a profit of \$1,000 annually. In the same year, however, Church made \$18,000 from artwork sales, a huge amount at the time.

"He also, when he would make big studio paintings, would display them for public viewing," Kerin said. The cost to see a painting: 50 cents.

"That's like going to an expensive movie today," Kerin said. "And the line was around the block. It's just a totally different concept of recreation...this is the kind of stature he had in the public eye — and he was equally received by art critics."

Central Park's designer, Frederic Law Olmsted, strongly endorsed Church as a parks commissioner; he felt Church's presence ensured that the "art element should be recognized."

Consequently, Olmsted and Church were also in the same social circles in New York City, and both grew up in Hartford, CT.

The lecture coincides with the Morgan's "Romantic Gardens: Art, Nature and Landscape Design" exhibition, opening May 21; it features close to 100 texts and artworks, including two paintings by Church, which together illustrate the feelings and ideas of the Romantic era.

The Partnership hopes to bring more visitors to Olana through this lecture and this significant connection. "I think it will bring many people to Olana," said Prezorski. "It's a really important thing for this country to have a landscape like this. People in Columbia County have...what many believe is one of the most important designed landscapes in the country. We're hoping we're making some progress with that."

The lecture will be held May 26 at the Morgan. Tickets are \$15 and \$10 for Olana members. Visit the Morgan's website, www.themorgan.org, or call their box office at 212-685-0008, x560. For more about Olana, visit www.olana.org — or visit the site!

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