An artist's vision

Olana, New York State

An artist's house inspired by the Middle East articulates the ideas and ideals of 19th-century American art and landscaping. **Jeremy Musson** reports

OLANA is a unique document in the history of American art; a 19th-century artist's house and studio in New York State, with a name apparently taken from a Persian fortress treasure house. Seemingly dropped from the pages of the *Arabian Nights*, the house sits among dense woods overlooking the Hudson River and within sight of the Catskill Mountains; a place in which art, architecture and nature meet (***Fig 4***).

The house was designed and built by Frederic Church (***Fig 1***), one of America's leading landscape painters. His house was inspired by Middle Eastern domestic architecture—specifically, Church said, the 'Persian, adapted to the Occident' (***Fig 2***). Completed in 1872, it anticipated by some years the famous Arab Hall that Sir Frederic Leighton added to his Kensington studio in 1877–81 and has no real precedent in American design. Unlike many of the famous 19th-century studio houses, Olana was not built around the studio room, its north-lit studio extension being a later addition.

The house expresses a Ruskinian delight in polychromy and shows the immediate influence of Owen Jones's publications on the history of ornament, but is far more than an artist's richly decorated home. Nature and what one contemporary called 'the picturesque Eden' were at the heart of this project. In 1864, the year Church began work on improving the surrounding landscape in earnest, George Perkins Marsh published *Man & Nature*, a copy of which is in Church's library. This urged reforestation of former agricultural lands to avoid the 'desertification' of the country.

Church clearly took the message of the book to heart and spent decades refining the tree planting around the house in what had been a heavily worked agrarian landscape. He also personally directed the creation of a road network and the excavation of a 10-acre lake.

The house, vividly coloured inside and out, enjoys dramatic views of the Hudson, especially to the south. Church furnished Olana's interior with a richness equal to the decoration (***Fig 3***). One contemporary wrote that it was 'a museum of all the fine arts, rich in bronzes, paintings, sculptures, and antique and artistic specimens from all over the world'.

For more than 50 years, since the death in 1964 of Church's daughter-in-law, Sally, aged 96, the house, associated farm and woodland drives have been preserved as a historic site.

Church was an extraordinarily talented young man, although, as did many of England's great Victorian artists, he lived long enough to see his own glittering reputation fall into obscurity. At the age of 18, he was a pupil of the renowned landscapist Thomas Cole and he was elected to New York's academy of design at 23. His landscapes were huge brooding studies of the vastness of the Americas, capturing a pre-Darwinian moment in which Nature seemed part of God's great design. ➤

Fig 1 above: **In search of inspiration: Frederic Church and his son in Beirut, in 1868.**
Fig 2 right: **Church's own design for the south-west façade of Olana, about 1870**

Collection Olana State Historic Site, NYS

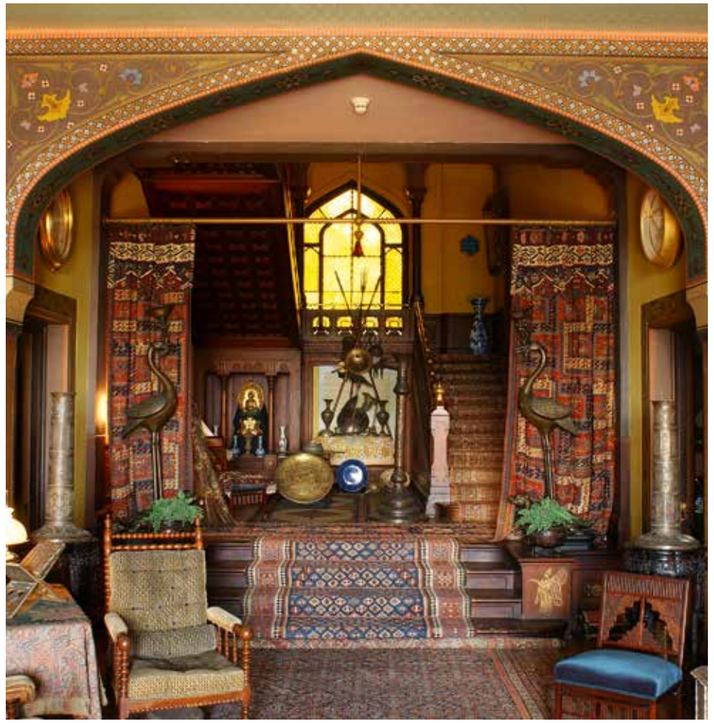

Fig 3 above: **The Court Hall, looking through to the staircase hall.** *Fig 4 below:* **The vividly polychromatic south front: the main house of 1872, the studio wing added in 1888–89**

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In 1857, his painting *Niagara* brought him international fame (it was shown in Britain in 1857 and 1858). He travelled twice to South America, inspired by *Cosmos*, von Humboldt's treatise on science and nature. After seeing Church's 1859 showstopper *Heart of the Andes*, Mark Twain wrote to his brother: 'Your third visit will find your brain gasping and straining with futile efforts to take all the wonder in.'

Church married Isabel Carnes in 1860 and decided to invest in a country property on the Hudson River. Maintaining the land as a productive and working farm, they built a farmhouse, which, in 1861, went by the name of Cosy Cottage. By 1864, Church had added a detached studio to the property, situated on a high point with panoramic views.

> 'Nature and "the picturesque Eden" were at the heart of Church's project'

In awe of Nature, Church painted the river repeatedly, in between his expeditions across the Americas and to Europe and the Middle East. He combined farming for profit with energetic efforts to improve the land, writing: 'For several seasons after I selected this spot as my home, I thought of hardly anything but planting trees, and had thousands and thousands of them set out on the southern and northern slopes.'

The death of two infant children in 1865 was a dreadful blow. Two years later, Church acquired some land immediately above his studio and planned to build a house on the summit, where he and his wife would raise a new family. Initial designs by Richard Morris Hunt show a house with a tower and tall dormers, in the spirit of a French manor house. However, before building started, Church, his wife and young son journeyed abroad via Europe and the Middle East, with the intention of turning his landscapist's eye and mind towards the topography of the Bible lands.

The experience quickly changed his architectural references. Of Beirut, he wrote: 'I like the houses. They are so solid and capacious and are decidedly effective albeit the carpenter work would amuse our people.'

His wife also made notes in her diary about the interiors in Damascus: 'Walls & ceiling [were] highly and gorgeously decorated, and mirrors everywhere, amid the decorations, little bits of mirrors—doors & all the woodwork—inlaid with ivory & mother of pearl—At night by candle light, the effect must be quite splendid—One is reminded of *Arabian Nights*' tales.'

Fig 5: **A room with a view: looking through a Moorish-style window in the studio to the Catskill Mountains above the Hudson River**

The buildings of Damascus, visited in 1868, also caught Church's imagination and he wrote to a friend: 'I have got new and excellent ideas about house building since I came abroad.' He advised another friend, Osborn, to choose a young architect on the grounds that he would find a youthful practitioner 'more painstaking and more tractable than an old and popular one'.

Designs in the Moorish style by the popular Richard Morris Hunt do survive, suggesting that Church began again with him on his return, but, by May 1870, he had switched the commission to the English-born and trained Calvert Vaux, with whom he kept up a full correspondence as the design evolved, providing hundreds of sketches and designs by his own hand.

Vaux had first arrived in America in 1850 to collaborate with Andrew Jackson Downing on landscape projects; he also worked with Olmsted on Central Park in New York City. Vaux's brother-in-law Jervis McEntee was another Hudson River School painter and had been apprenticed to Church. They were all —Downing and Church included—members of New York's Century Association Club. ➢

Vaux was sensitive to the setting and to Church's landscape interests. He was evidently an adaptable and supportive designer. Church supplied sketches and designs based on studies made on his travels and the books on 'Persian, and Oriental Architecture' that his pupil Lockwood de Forest recorded they read in the evenings after working together in the studio.

Church also, according to his daughter, discussed everything with his wife and felt her influence could be seen everywhere. Vaux regarded himself as the 'consulting architect' on the project, his task being to make it all work as architecture proper.

It was something of an aesthetic adventure for Church to attempt to incorporate favoured elements of Middle Eastern domestic architecture into this very different setting. He told John Ferguson Weir, another painter friend, that 'a Feudal Castle which I am building—under the modest name of a dwelling house—absorbs all my time and attention. I am obliged to watch it so closely—for having undertaken to get my architecture from Persia where I have never been—nor any of my friends either—I am obliged to imagine Persian architecture on paper'.

> 'The house is exotic, but entirely its own, with its visual focus the Hudson River'

The challenges did not stop there, for Church then had the interesting task of explaining his ideas 'to a lot of mechanics whose ideal of architecture is wrapped up in felicitous recollections of a successful brick school house or meeting house or jail'.

The house was finished by the end of 1872, a solid, almost fort-like presence on the hilltop, with a prominent, steeply roofed and highly decorated tower. Up close, the entire edifice is enlivened by highly unusual polychromatic brickwork and cornices 'decorated in beautiful colours'.

The interior is well planned; at its centre lies the court hall placed behind a south-facing, recessed, verandah-like porch (or *ombra*) positioned between the sitting room and parlour. North of the Court Hall and framed by a broad Moorish arch is the staircase hall. To the east is the largest room of the house: the stately dining room that doubles as a picture gallery. The north-western part of the house is the kitchen and associated servants' rooms (here, one suspects, Vaux must have intervened with his architect's practical knowledge).

The views of the Hudson to the south are the focus of a large balcony, known as the *piazza*; they are also seen from the tower, particularly from its three-arched, third-storey platform (***Fig 8***).

Fig 6 above: **The sitting room (or West Parlor), with Church's painting *El Khasné, Petra*, 1874, over the chimneypiece.** *Fig 7 left:* **A detail of the stencilled decoration throughout Olana, all designed by Church**

The carefully designed decorative schemes took another four years (***Fig 7***). Church himself mixed the colours on his palette and made up swatches for the walls and ceilings. He painted detailed versions of his designs for the borders and the cornices—large numbers of these original designs still survive. Partly furnished with collections acquired on Church's Middle Eastern tour, the resulting house was undoubtedly exotic, reminiscent of a Paris studio house, but also entirely its own, with its visual focus the broad American landscape of the Hudson River.

In 1885, Church began a refurbishment, introducing parquet floors and Indian-style chimneypieces designed by de Forest, also a successful painter, clearly in collaboration with Church himself. The following year, de Forest began fitting his own New York home with an 'East India' interior.

In 1886, Church inherited a substantial collection of his own paintings that had belonged to his parents and passed back to him after the death of his sister. This radically changed the character of the hang; previously, except for his *El Khasné Petra* (***Fig 6***), the paintings had been principally copies of Old Masters.

In 1888–89, Church designed and built the studio wing (***Fig 5***). The studio had views on three sides—the north-light window being the largest—and walls painted in the soft red used throughout the house. Turretted at the corners like a toy fort and detailed in the same polychromatic brickwork as the rest of the house, the studio extension enlarged the picturesque effect considerably.

The new wing included a connecting corridor leading off the west side of the house, an observatory and another bedroom. Church then closed his New York studio and transferred its contents to Olana.

When Church died in 1900, the house passed to his son Louis, who had been acting as estate manager. He preserved the property with little alteration until his death in 1947 and his wife lived on there until 1964. His wife's nephew Charles Lark then inherited and resolved to sell, but was persuaded to give various interested parties time to acquire the house, collection and land.

Following a major public campaign—launched by art historian David Huntington and with the support of Governor Rockefeller—the State of New York was authorised to acquire the property in 1966.

Olana remains an admired and active cultural site, with an executive board that actively campaigns to preserve the surrounding landscape in which Thomas Cole, Frederic Church and others of the Hudson River School found something of the spirit of America. Much attention has also been focused on the immediate landscape and farm, with plantings and maintenance of the roads laid out by Church so that, in season, horse-drawn carriage rides allow visitors to encounter views exactly as Church and his wife, family and friends would have seen them. Olana was never merely a house—it was a place to encounter the soul of a nation.

For more information, visit www.olana.org

Acknowledgements: James Anthony Ryan, author of 'Frederic Church's Olana' (2001) and Sean Sawyer

Fig 8: **Church's project was as much about reviving the landscape as anything else: the view from the tower down the Hudson valley**

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