

THE VICTORIAN

How well can we know the Victorians?





Frederic Church's Olana

Dr Sean E. Sawyer shares progress in revealing the artist's masterwork for the public.



This year marks the bicentenary of the birth of Frederic Church (1826-1900), the United States' foremost landscape artist. The

Olana Partnership has organised 'Frederic Church 200', a year-long initiative featuring exhibitions, publications and programmes that highlight Church's creativity and spirit of adventure as well as his extraordinary global reach. Church's large-scale, immersive landscape paintings astonished audiences in his own time and helped place American art on the world stage for the first time. However, Church's masterwork is Olana, his home, studio and farm overlooking the Hudson River Valley.

Here, over the course 40 years from 1860 to his death in 1900, he created a 250-acre landscape that married art and the most advanced thinking about ecology and environmental conservation. Church was the primary designer of every aspect of Olana, from his 1860 Picturesque farmhouse known as 'Cosy Cottage' to the hilltop villa completed

between 1870 and 1875 and the wider landscape they sit in. Today, Olana is the most intact artist's environment in the United States and a National Historic Landmark and New York State Historic Site.

Over the past 25 years the Olana Partnership and the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation have restored the majority of Olana's buildings and landscape. Visitors can enjoy more than five miles of carriage roads which Church designed to create a Picturesque sequence of framed views within the estate, as well as dramatic panoramic vistas over the Hudson Valley and Catskill and Berkshire mountains. Until very recently, the majority of the 175,000 annual visitors to the site only experienced 1% of the property, the area directly around Church's Persian-inspired villa with its sweeping views. While the historic landscape had been successfully restored, the only visitor facilities were in the former carriage house on the hilltop.

In 2015, a planning review identified the



Frederic Church Center (Peter Aaron/OTTO). Above left: Church's composed view from Lake Road (author). Above: Frederic Church, *Clouds over Olana, August 1872*. Oil on paper (New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Olana State Historic Site).

need for a visitor orientation facility, adjacent to the site's public entrance. The study was led by Nelson Byrd Woltz Landscape Architects and they selected an easily accessible site nestled within the topography to ensure that the new building and its parking lot would not be visible from anywhere within the historic landscape or from Church's house and studio. This was a fundamental requirement for the first new structure at Olana since Church's death, which is now named the Frederic Church Center for Art and Landscape.

Having a landscape architect make the site selection was important, and also aligned to Church's own design approach, in turn informed by that of his friend Calvert Vaux (1824-1895). London-born Vaux had trained with Lewis Nockalls Cottingham (1787-1847) and was recruited by the United States' pioneering landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852) on a visit to England in 1850 to form a collaborative practice based in Newburgh, New York, in the mid-Hudson Valley.

Vaux's design philosophy, articulated in *Villas and Cottages* of 1857, centered on integrating buildings into the landscape, subordinating their forms to the topography, both natural and man-made. His partnership with Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903) began with New York's Central Park where they brought Church onto the five-man managing commission in 1871. At the same time, Church was playing a leading role in the founding of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Vaux was Church's architectural advisor on the design of his villa at Olana.

This same collaborative approach shaped the design of the Frederic Church Center, begun in 2017. The Architecture Research Office partnered with Nelson Byrd Woltz to help produce an emphatically modern yet modest one-storey pavilion, set within a contoured landscape. Movement into and through the building leads visitors to a gentle stair that gives access to a terrace where they encounter the first of Church's three-dimensional landscape compositions. Here,

the towered, polychromatic form of the villa rises mirage-like above the 10-acre artificial lake framed by native trees, descendants of some of the tens of thousands planted by Church. In 2025, 80% of visitors began their experience of Olana here, giving them the opportunity to experience the breadth of Frederic Church's masterwork of American landscape design. ●

FURTHER READING

Four books on Church and Olana will be published in 2026:
Olana: Frederic Church's Vision of Architecture and Landscape, Barry Bergdoll, Sean E. Sawyer and Thomas L. Woltz (Rizzoli)
Glorious Country: How Frederic Church Brought the World to America and America to the World, Victoria Johnson (Scribner)
Composing Olana: A Journey on Foot Through an American Landscape, Annik LaFarge (Fordham University Press)
Frederic Church: Global Artist, edited by Timothy Barringer, Elizabeth Mankin Kornhauser, and Jennifer Raab (Yale University Press)

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