



The main house at Olana

Olana: Frederic Church's living masterpiece

To visit Olana State Historic Site is to step inside the questing and ever-curious mind of the great nineteenth-century American painter Frederic Edwin Church. The ornate villa and meticulously designed grounds of the surrounding estate rank as one of his most superlative works, revealing his diverse interests and far-flung influences, as well as his love for the pastoral Hudson Valley. Olana's grounds are open year-round; the house from May through October. Visitors can reserve a paid guided tour through the eclectically adorned house and studio, or (free of charge) explore the scenic grounds—taking in views of the Catskill Mountains, Taconic Hills, and Hudson River.

The name Olana is believed to have been

inspired—Church was not clear on the point—by a fabled Persian treasure house and fortress of antiquity. Church chose to build on a site where he and his mentor, Thomas Cole, the founder of the Hudson River school, had often sketched years earlier. The house, built between 1870 and 1872, is a hybrid of Victorian and Middle Eastern architectural styles, designed with the help of Calvert Vaux, one of the architects of Central Park. The main building is an elaborate medley of pointed arches, balconies, mashrabiya-inspired windows, stenciled surfaces, and decorative brickwork and finishes. The collection inside is equally enchanting and heterogeneous—a treasure trove of paintings, furnishings, and keepsakes from Church and his wife Isabel's travels abroad. Virtually unaltered since the family resided there in the late nineteenth century, the interiors reflect the artist's worldly tastes, from the Pre-Columbian artifacts to about a dozen rugs Church shipped home from different parts of the Middle East. Church's work, including his stencils and architectural sketches for Olana, is prominently on display. In the sitting room, his *El Kabsne, Petra* hangs above the fireplace, not far from Cole's *Protestant Burying Ground, Rome Cemetery in Rome*.

Put aside ample time to experience one of Church's greatest achievements, wrought not on canvas but on the land: the 250-acre naturalistic landscape. A network of carriage roads runs through the grounds—which include working and ornamental farms, a manmade lake, native woodlands, and meadows—leading visitors, as Church carefully planned, through a sequence of majestic vistas. Today, Olana also hosts

rotating exhibitions of work by contemporary artists, events, and more. Check the website to learn about other educational and public programming offered.

Nicole Anderson

Olana State Historic Site, 5720 State Route 9G, Hudson, NY 12534; 518-828-0135; olana.org

The Thomas Cole House: Birthplace of the Hudson River School

The English-born artist Thomas Cole (1801–1848) tolerated no ill comparisons to his adopted home in upstate New York. As he wrote to a friend in 1842: “Must I tell you that neither the Alps nor the Apennines, no, nor even Aetna itself, have dimmed, in my eyes, the beauty of our own Catskills?”

The Hudson River Valley—with its undulating peaks, rushing waters, dense forests, and crystalline light—served as the artist's muse, *raison d'être*, and home for much of his life. His work inspired a generation of landscape painters, and a visit to his home in the town of Catskill—now the Thomas Cole National Historic Site—is a must for all who love and admire the art of the Hudson River school.

Cedar Grove, as Cole called his homestead, sits on a bluff above the Hudson that offers westward views of the northeast range of the Catskill Mountains—an escarpment known as the Great Wall of Manitou. The property is open to the public from May through October. Guided tours are offered, but visitors can stroll the grounds on their own. Wander through the Federal-style



Olana's front hall



Thomas Cole house

A rendering of the West Parlor at the Cole House



house where Cole and his family resided, then explore the restored “old studio,” now brimming with his easels and tools, and the “new studio,” recently reconstructed to Cole’s design, which serves as a gallery for special exhibitions and lectures.

Recently, a new discovery was made: Cole’s decorative painting in the main house, the earliest-known interior painting of its kind by an American artist. Buried beneath layers of paint for more than a century, the artist’s painted borders were uncovered during the meticulous restoration of the first floor. Such details—along with a multimedia installation featuring Cole’s words and artworks—help bring the Hudson Valley’s most beloved painter back to life.

N. A.

Thomas Cole National Historic Site, 218 Spring Street, Catskill, NY 12414; 518-943-7465 thomascollection.org

Clermont and the Livingston Family

They sit along the east bank of the Hudson River in Dutchess and Columbia counties like so many pearls on a necklace: some three dozen estates built by the Livingston family and their relations. They range in size, style, and

splendor, but the estate richest in history is Clermont. Named for its clear vista of the Catskill Mountains, it was the seat of seven generations of a family whose members played a leading role in the revolutionary era and the early years of the republic.

The first Livingston arrived in this hemisphere from Scotland around 1675, eleven years after New Amsterdam became New York. Known as Robert Livingston the Elder, he married into Dutch society, and acquired a 160,000-acre land grant from the colonial governor, and styled himself “Lord of Livingston Manor.” His son, Robert of Clermont—as he is called (early generations of Livingstons had the vexing habit of naming their sons Robert)—built his eponymous mansion about 1740. It was Robert of Clermont’s grandson, Robert R. Livingston, who became the most famous member of the family. Known as “the Chancellor”—the title at the time for the highest-ranking judge in New York—he was a delegate to the Continental Congress and sat on the Committee of Five that drafted the Declaration of Independence. His involvement in the rebellion so incensed the British that in 1777 they burned down the original Clermont. It was rebuilt the following year by the Chancellor’s mother, Margaret Beekman Livingston. The Chancellor administered the first oath of office to George Washington in 1789, and in the early years of the nineteenth century, he worked with Robert Fulton to develop the first commercially viable steamboat, the *Clermont*, which stopped at the mansion in 1807 as it chugged up the river on its maiden voyage.

Clermont mansion has undergone several changes and additions through the decades, as the socially prominent Livingstons kept current with architectural tastes. Today’s elegant edifice has Georgian bones, topped by a steeply pitched roof favored in the Victorian era. The house is appointed much as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century, with empire-style sofas and settees, elegant buffets with ormolu mounts, a model of the *Clermont*,

and oil paintings of Livingstons. The house and the surrounding gardens, woodlands, and meadows are now a New York state park, open to the public and hosting events that range from July 4th fireworks viewing to sheep-shearing demonstrations.

S.D.

Clermont State Historic Site, 87 Clermont Avenue, Germantown, NY 12526; 518-537-6622; friendsofclermont.org

Bard College: a trove of architectural gems

Dating to 1860, when it was founded by philanthropist John Bard in association with leaders of New York City’s Episcopal Church, Bard College wins plaudits for its lively liberal arts curriculum. But what strikes the casual visitor is the architectural diversity of the school’s five hundred-acre campus in Annandale-on-Hudson, which features buildings that range in style from the neoclassical to the ebullient modernity of Frank Gehry.

One of the most impressive is Blithewood, a sweeping Georgian revival pile complete with columns, bas-relief garlands, and urn-shaped finials. Built in 1900 on a riverside estate that dates to 1680, the mansion and its tiered formal garden were donated to the college in 1951. Four connected dormitories collectively known as Stone Row, built 1891, make a splendid example of the Collegiate Gothic style. Another landmark is the Tudor revival Ward Manor, erected in 1918, a former estate house purchased by the college in 1963 (along with its picturesque miniature castle gatehouse) and now used as a dorm.

While influential architects Robert Venturi and Rafael Viñoly contributed striking designs



Clermont's drawing room