

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

A House That's Preposterous Yet Delightful

Olana, the house of Frederic Edwin Church, is a painter's dream of Persian architecture rising over the Hudson.



Church collaborated with Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted in the design of both house and grounds. *PHOTO: UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP NORTH AMERICA LLC / ALAMY*

By

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Oct. 7, 2016 2:41 p.m. ET

Just below the town of Hudson, N.Y., some 500 feet above the river, stands Olana, the house of the painter Frederic Edwin Church. All the standard features of the full-blown Victorian villa are there: the hefty corner tower, the willfully bewildering floor plan, the cupola-rich roofline that quivers like the needle of a seismograph. And yet they are used as never before. For Olana is a jumble of accurate detail and pure imagination, a painter's dream of Persian architecture, and one of the most outrageously colorful buildings ever built in America.

At first blush, Church's choice of Persian architecture seems odd. He freely admitted it was "a style of architecture I have never seen." But he did come close. During a yearlong trip to Europe and the Middle East in 1867-68, much of it on horseback, Church rode as far as Damascus. He became enchanted with the architecture of the Islamic city, its lovely courtyards where one might recline on soft carpets, shaded pleasantly by a mulberry tree. He seemed to think a painter of exotic subjects—which he was, having made his fame by painting tropical rain forests, Mexican volcanoes, and Arctic icebergs—should encase himself in an equally exotic house.

The idea, while delightful, is preposterous. A courtyard open to the sky is violently out of place on a lonely hilltop frequently covered in snow. But Church did not choose it for its practicality. Nor did he choose it for its eye-catching eccentricity, as did that other master showman P. T. Barnum, who had built himself an Islamic caprice, Iranistan, in Bridgeport, Conn. For Church, the Persian style was a means to an end, and that end was color.

Today color is an arrangement of pixels that can be adjusted at will. But in Church's world, it could provoke the fiercest battles over history, geology and even religion. Archaeologists had just demonstrated that ancient buildings and statues had been painted in lurid colors, which horrified everyone (and still does). Meanwhile, Charles Lyell had just published his three-volume "Principles of Geology" (1830-33), which demonstrated that the Earth was millions of year old, and that the evidence was there in layers of colored rock. The traditional view that the Earth was created in 4004 B.C. (calculated by Bishop Ussher from life-spans in the Bible) could no longer hold.

As this was happening, chemistry was giving painters dozens of intensely vivid synthetic pigments, from cadmium yellow (1846) to mauve (1859). Church was the first American painter to grasp the possibilities of the spectrum of colors now available, and not only on the canvas.

He assigned the rooms at Olana specific colors that related to their function, from the deep restful forest green of the living room to the nervous active red of his studio. Against the room's principal color, he juxtaposed secondary accents, harmonizing them to create a kind of color chord. To do this, he eliminated such conventional architectural features as baseboards, door frames and cornices, and turned them into bands of pure color. Every room is an abstract three-dimensional painting.

The exultant colors of Olana are the product of a passing moment. The house was briefly stylish when it was completed in 1872, then passé, and by the time Church died in 1900 monstrously unfashionable. For the next half century, polite taste was scandalized by its strident colors, visual density and sheer graphic loudness. Only family loyalty preserved it. His devoted daughter-in-law Sally clung on till 1964, which was just long enough. Had she died during the modernist 1950s, Olana would now be the name of a gated community or a power plant. But her death came in the window between the debut of Andy Warhol and the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper," and for the first time in almost a century, Olana no longer shocked. It was a Victorian house for a psychedelic age.

This year, to mark the 50th anniversary of the acquisition of Olana by the state of New York, its original carriage trails have been reopened. The visitor rambles along tree-shaded paths, gets a peekaboo view of the distant house across a lake, then plunges again into a cool glade. The hide-and-seek ends with a sudden unexpected turn of the trail, where one rides up unexpectedly at the base of the corner tower. This is the same lively alternation of meadow and lake, forest and cliff, that one knows from Central Park. And not surprisingly, for Church collaborated with Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted in the design of both house and grounds.

Now it is finally possible to understand Olana as a unity of house and grounds. Without its setting, the Persian fantasia makes little sense. Its loud palette of red, black and yellow desperately needs complementary colors to offset it, and this Church provided in the form of 250

acres of green woods and meadows—an emerald setting in which the ruby glistens. Belatedly Olana is no longer a cranky Victorian folly but that rarest of all jewels, an essay in chromatic thought.

—*Mr. Lewis is the author of the forthcoming “City of Refuge: Separatists and Utopian Town Planning” (Princeton University Press).*