



# Hudson River Celebrations

BY JOHN K. HOWAT

**T**he year 1909 marked the 300th anniversary of the discovery of the Hudson River by Henry Hudson in 1609 and the 100th anniversary of Robert Fulton's journey up the Hudson River on the first successful steamboat. New York State commemorated the events with an extravaganza of Barnum-like festivities that ran from September 25 through October 11, 1909. The over-arching purpose of the celebration was to emphasize the vital roles of Hudson and Fulton in making the Hudson River and New York City sources of economic and social importance.

This year, to mark the 400th anniversaries of Henry Hudson's voyage and of Frenchman Samuel de Champlain's first journey across the waters of the lake that bears his name, as well as the 200th anniversary of Robert Fulton's successful application of steam to navigation, the Hudson-Fulton-Champlain Quadricentennial Commission has coordinated a yearlong program of events to highlight the historic and aesthetic importance of the region.

Basic to today's fascination with the Hudson Region is the strongly renewed interest in the Hudson River School, an essential component of the mid-nineteenth-century American art world centered in New York City. Thomas Cole



(1801–1848), the revered founder of the movement, and Frederic Church (1826–1900), his most important student, are remembered and admired for the high quality and idealistic nature of their works, which have fired the imaginations of generations of American landscape painters since. Cedar Grove and Olana

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**Fig. 2:** Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *Indians Viewing Landscape*, ca. 1827. Oil on panel, 18 x 24 inches. Courtesy private collection.

**Fig. 1:** Thomas Cole's home in Catskill, New York, now Cedar Grove, The Thomas Cole National Historic Site. Courtesy The Thomas Cole National Historic Site.

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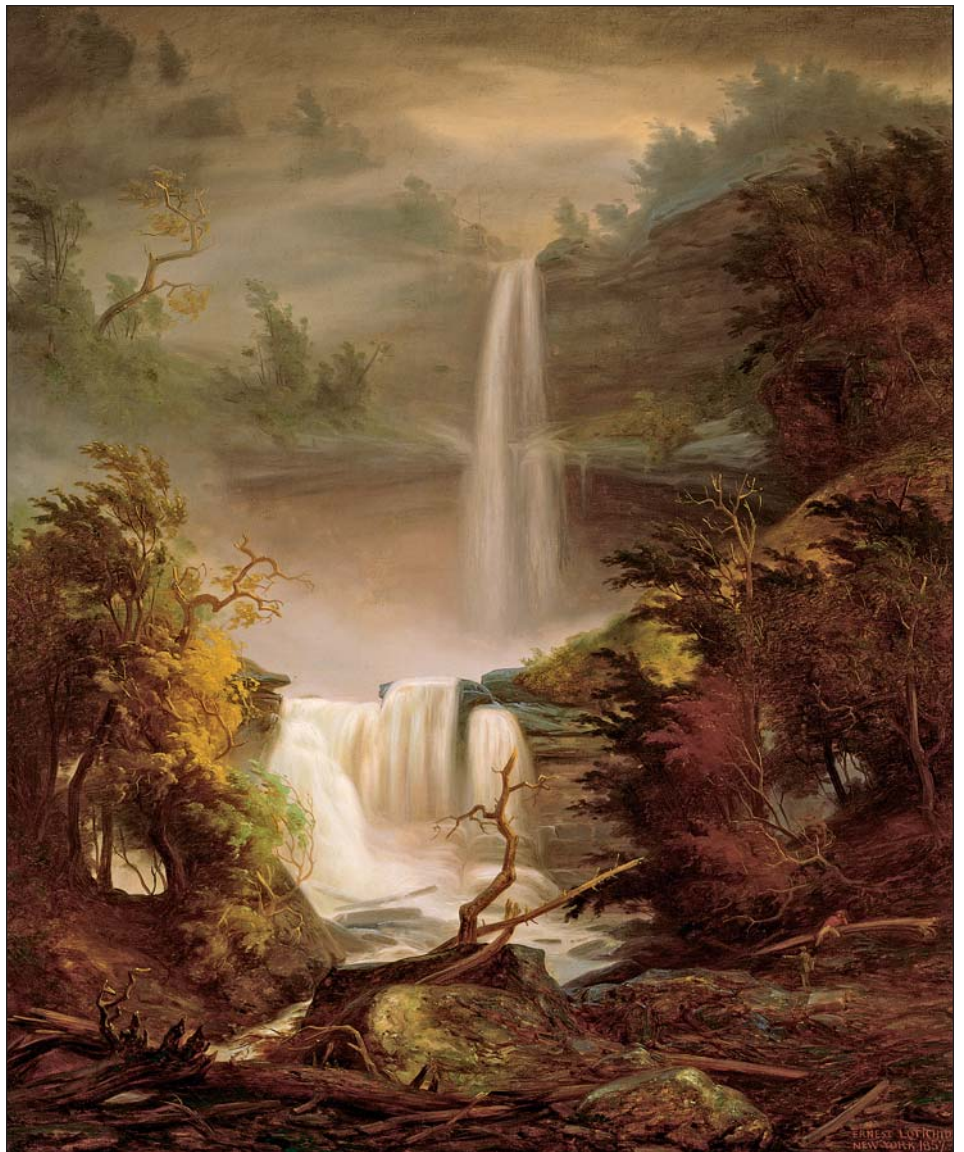
**Fig. 3:** Thomas Cole (1801–1848), *View on the Catskill—Early Autumn*, 1837. Oil on canvas, 39 x 63 inches. Gift in memory of Jonathan Sturges by his children, 1895. Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

**Fig. 4:** Ernest Lotichius (1840–1876), *Falls of Kaaterskill*, 1857. Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches. Courtesy private collection.

State Historic Site, the onetime homes of Thomas Cole and Frederic Church, that face each other across the Hudson River, have coordinated exhibitions to celebrate the Hudson River School of painting.

*River Views of the Hudson River School*, from May 2 through October 11, 2009, at Cedar Grove (Fig. 1), curated by Nancy Siegel, brings together landscape sketches and finished paintings by several major and some lesser known figures of the school, among them: Thomas Cole, Ernest Lotichius, Alfred Bricher, John Ludlow Morton, Henry Ary, Regis Gignoux, Worthington Whittredge, Richard W. Hubbard, and Henry Boese. The selection highlights the subject matter and aesthetic tendencies that came to define the Hudson River School.

Thomas Cole became enamored of the scenery of the mid-Hudson region when he made his first sketching trip there in 1825, boarding at Cedar Grove, a farm owned by the local merchant John A. Thomson. In 1836, Cedar Grove became his permanent home when he married Maria Bartow, a niece of Thomson's. *Indians Viewing Landscape* (Fig. 2), an early work by Cole on view in the exhibition, is typical of the freehand field sketches that established the working method and model for his students and numerous followers. This procedure captured the essential components of a chosen scene that would be elaborated later in the studio on a larger canvas. Frequently, an artist would synthesize numerous views or images into one painting. Cole's inclusion of the Native Americans gazing out over the land is a culturally significant comment on settlement, colonialism, and human/nature coexistence. It also suggests that the work was not painted entirely on site, but was possibly expanded upon after Cole had witnessed a similar scene. In a work such as his characteristically sunny *View on the Catskill—Early Autumn* (1837, Fig. 3), Cole translates





**Fig. 5:** Alfred T. Bricher (1837-1908),  
*Up the Hudson*, 1864.  
Oil on canvas, 12 x 20 inches.  
Courtesy private collection.

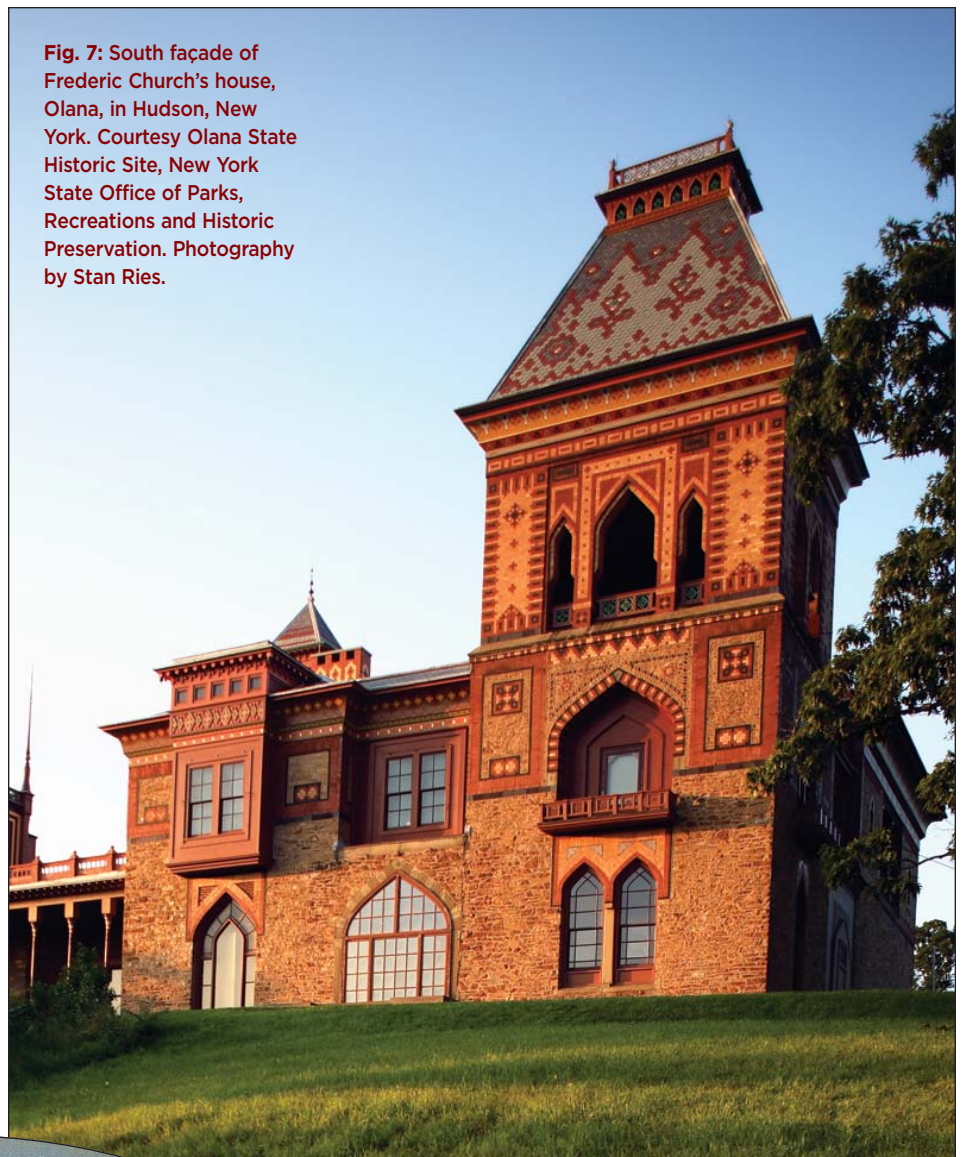
**Fig. 6:** Jasper F. Cropsey (1823-1900),  
*On the Hudson Near West Point*, 1877.  
Oil on canvas, 12 x 20 inches.  
Courtesy private collection.



the connection between nature and the sublime into a visual language, conveying his love for the river and its environs through warm lighting and lush vegetation. The figures in the foreground are dwarfed when placed in the expansive landscape, and add to the tangibly majestic quality of the natural world.

Another painting on exhibit, Ernest Lotichius' (1840–1876) *Falls of the Kaaterskill* (1857, Fig. 4), is a carefully composed view of an iconic Catskill Mountains site favored by New York artists after it had been popularized by Cole's work. Lotichius' multilayered scene is characteristic of the school's visual style. The twisted branches, dense shrubbery, rushing waters, and thick blanket of fog create an atmosphere of unbridled wilderness. The foreground, full of rich reds, browns, and the occasional golden yellow, melts into a fog of subdued blues, greens, and grays, creating a mystical ambiance that showcases the artist's mastery of differing visual styles and brush techniques.

Many of Cole's followers chose to specialize in such landscape genres as wooded interiors, rocky ledges, atmospheric studies, clouds and skies, or sea and river shores. Alfred Bricher's (1837–1908) *Up the Hudson* (1864, Fig. 5) is typical of his specialist view of water-related



**Fig. 7:** South façade of Frederic Church's house, Olana, in Hudson, New York. Courtesy Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreations and Historic Preservation. Photography by Stan Ries.



landscapes. Although a single scene, Bricher showcases his range of skills by including assorted reflections in the water—the crisply mirrored shore in the foreground, the tiny, yet meticulously rendered boat in the water, the misty hills in the distance—while exhibiting effortless shifts in tonalities, from deep reds to light grays fading into delicate shades of green.

Jasper Cropsey's (1823–1900) *On the Hudson Near West Point* (1877, Fig. 6) is a fine example of his mature work produced in a succession of New York City studios, in which he almost always presents colorful autumn scenes

**Fig. 8:** Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), *Twilight Among the Mountains (Catskill Creek)*, 1845. Oil on canvas, 18½ x 24 inches. Courtesy Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreations and Historic Preservation (OL.1981.25).



**Fig. 9:** Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), *Looking West from Olana*, 1864. Oil on artist's board, 13 x 12 inches. Courtesy Jamie and Marshall Field Collection.

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**Fig. 10:** Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), *Hudson Valley in Winter from Olana*, ca. 1870-1871. Oil on academy board, 11¾ x 18¾ inches. Courtesy Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreations and Historic Preservation (OL.1980.36).

**Fig. 11:** Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), *Summer Sunset from Olana*, ca. 1870-1874. Oil on off-white academy board, 11¾ x 18¾ inches. Courtesy Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks, Recreations and Historic Preservation (OL.1977.207).

along the Hudson River. The amalgamation of fiery reds, chocolate browns, and golden yellows smattered with sunlight creates an atmosphere of waning warmth giving way to the crisp vibrancy of fall.

The exhibition at Olana State Historic Site, *Glories of the Hudson: Frederic Edwin Church's Views from Olana*, co-curated by Evelyn Trebilcock and Valerie Balint, and running from May 23 through October 12, 2009, inaugurates the new Evelyn & Maurice Sharp Gallery, rooms dedicated to special

exhibitions (Fig. 7). On display are sixteen works by artists such as Church, Arthur Parton, Benjamin Bellows Grant Stone, Lockwood de Forest, Louis P. Church, and Charles de Wolf Brownell, along with one anonymous etching.

Born into a wealthy Hartford, Connecticut, family, Frederic Edwin Church had the means to develop his early interest in art. When Daniel Wadsworth, a patron of Thomas Cole's, prevailed upon Cole to take Church as his pupil, the youthful Church rapidly learned

how to draw fluently, arrange attractive compositions, and paint in an expressive manner reflecting his ardent love of the landscape. The nineteen-year-old Church's precocious *Twilight Among the Mountains* (Fig. 8), his first offering to the National Academy of Design Annual Exhibition in 1845, illustrates how strongly Church's work was influenced by Cole's instruction. The composition's luminous sunlight and verdant trees are strikingly similar to the elements in Cole's *View on the Catskill*.

Church traveled widely in South America,

Europe, the Arctic, the Middle East, and North Africa, gaining recognition and wealth for his dense, multifaceted compositions of such commanding subjects as the Andes Mountains (*The Heart of the Andes*, 1859), Niagara Falls (*Niagara*, 1857), and an exploding volcano (*Cotopaxi*, 1862). In 1860, Church had bought farmland at Hudson, New York, and married Isabel Carnes. In the 1870s, he began to devote his creative energies increasingly to gentleman farming and the building of Olana, his hilltop fantasy of a “Persian” villa. What began as a small cottage on one hundred and twenty-five acres of farmland became a large estate including a lake, park, a farm, roads, gardens, and Church’s home and studio. Possessing panoramic views of the surrounding Hudson River and Catskill Mountains, Church’s plan was for every vantage point to look out onto what appeared to be a living landscape painting, even treating the windows as “picture frames” for the scenic backdrop.

Enjoying his time at Olana, Church turned his attention to producing oil sketches of the neighboring landscape. An early example of such work is *Looking West from Olana* (Fig. 9). In contrast to his major canvases this finished sketch has a lovely simplicity and subtlety, and yet lacks none of his mastery of composition and ability to capture various natural elements in a single image. The viewer’s eye is led across the tree tops in the foreground, to the sliver of the Hudson River and on to the Catskill Mountains, traveling upward to a sky that consumes most of the canvas. *Hudson Valley in Winter from Olana* (ca. 1871–1872, Fig. 10) presents a richly painted vista downriver from his free-standing studio, capturing the valley’s snowy grandeur and wintry sky. Even in such winter scenes, which might have been interrupted as barren and bleak, Church’s brush infuses with admiration. The waves of snow are lush, and combine with the bright sky to create a calming and hopeful atmosphere. In *Summer Sunset from Olana* (ca. 1870–1874, Fig. 11), Church takes on a different season and perspective, an upriver view to the northwest across to the Catskill Mountains. Radiating with warmth, it’s clear that Church’s love of the



Hudson River Valley was unconditional; he found arresting beauty and virtue in every season there. These sketches, so much freer than his earlier pictures, are among Church’s most distinguished and attractive works.

The landscape views of the Hudson River School show nature at its primitive purest, unblemished by man-made scars. In the twenty-first century, amid environmental concerns, such imagery has gained an added kind of importance, and these two appealing exhibitions should offer impetus to ecological efforts. **AEF**

*River Views of the Hudson River School* is on view from May 2 through October 11, 2009, at Cedar Grove. For more information call

518.943.7465 or visit [www.thomascole.org](http://www.thomascole.org). *Glories of the Hudson: Frederic Edwin Church’s Views from Olana* is on view from May 23 through October 12, 2009 at Olana State Historic site. For information call 518.828.1872 or visit [www.olana.org](http://www.olana.org). Both exhibits are accompanied by catalogues.

**John K. Howat** is an independent scholar specializing in art of the Hudson River Valley and is the primary author for this article. Contributions were made by **Kenneth John Myers, Nancy Siegel, Evelyn D. Trebilcock, and Valerie A. Balint**. All individuals have essays in their associated exhibition catalogues.

