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Fire and Ice: Treasures from the Photographic Collection of Frederic Church at Olana (review)

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Fire and Ice adds a new dimension to our understanding of nineteenth Century American art. It also provides the beginnings of inquiry into the colonialism of Church (1826–1900) and his era vis-à-vis territorial expansion in the United States and his two-year travels in the Middle East, from 1867–1869. But these two topics are not the focus of the book. It serves as the catalog—small but beautifully illustrated and designed—for the exhibition at the Dahesh Museum of Art in New York of Church’s collection of photographs, housed in his home, Olana, in upstate New York.

Some facts are necessary at the outset to make clear the magnitude and importance of the eighty page book, replete with illustrations. Church was a major landscape painter in the second half of the nineteenth Century. He collected, but did not himself take, photographs—of a variety of subjects and for a variety of reasons. There are about 5,700 photographs in his collection, the largest part (about 2,000) devoted to travel and culture. Others are portraits and photographs of nature, and still others document his life at Olana. According to Thomas Weston Fels, the text essay author, the photo collection mirrors the books in Church’s library. It served as a source of inspiration for his painting, but also documented nineteenth Century American territorial expansion and Church’s trips, especially to South America, the American northeast, the Middle East, and Mexico. It also served as an armchair companion when the painter could no longer travel. Church collected the work of the best nineteenth Century photographers and so Olana, with its collection, is now a primary site for the study of photography as art. Church’s interests were in reconciling science and religion, focusing on nature where the two meet, according to nineteenth Century American and some European conventions. Both his collection of photographs and his own painting testify to this dual theme, with “science as a matter of record and fact; art as a tool for interpreting new sources of information”(42). Church’s travels to the Middle East in 1867–1869 in particular were motivated by his desire to see for himself primarily

Christian sites, to discover the historical roots of Christianity at a time in his own country when faith was threatened.

Church's travels to the Near and Middle East have particular resonance now. Then, according to Fels, the images that Church produced (and collected?) were eye-openers to his public. "As the Middle East was in the process of being rediscovered by the West, the accurate images Church produced were in a real sense new to his public, where thirst for them was immense" (23). It is an irony only hinted at in Fels's essay that Church's travels inspired in him a passion for Islamic "decorative" arts and that his own home, Olana, first designed by Richard Morris Hunt in the French Renaissance style, was redecorated by Church in a distinctly Persian way.

One wonders what role ancient Persia played in the historical roots of Christianity, especially in Church's mind. Or if, then as now, for some the Near and Middle east were one great Other—over there—conflating Iran and Iraq, Persian and Arab. Perhaps what Church really admired and brought back with him was a taste for "Moorish" architecture and decoration, as the ornamenting of Olana attests.

Olana, named for a fortress in ancient Persia—the word meaning "protection and strength"(9), at least according to Church—was deemed by Church to be the Center of the World, and hailed by Fels as the "chief work of his later years"(28). One of the final images in the book is a photograph by Nicholas Whitman, called *View from the Court Hall, south, through the 'Ombra,' Olana*, of 2001. This best view from Olana epitomizes Church's issues. One sees the Hudson River valley, the Catskills and fertile fields and orchards. "The form through which all this quintessential American landscape...



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