

Famous New Yorker: Frederic Church

When Frederic Church chose an artistic career, no photograph could equal a great painting's ability to show people the colors and details of distant places. Church's ability to recreate what he saw in such places with paint made him one of the most successful American painters of the 19th century.

Frederic Edwin Church was born in Hartford, Connecticut, on May 4, 1826. His prosperous family paid for his early training by local artists, and a wealthy patron of the arts, Daniel Wadsworth, soon recognized Church's budding talent. In 1844, Wadsworth urged the most famous painter in the country, Thomas Cole, to take on the teenaged Frederic as a full-time student at his studio in Catskill, New York.

Cole's fame came from his large pictures of the American outdoors and his symbolic scenes of the rise and fall of great nations. He encouraged Church to use his skills to show viewers the majesty of American nature and give them a sense of man's real place in the world.

Under Cole's tutelage, Church exhibited paintings at art galleries in New York City, where critics recognized his talent. While he imitated some of Cole's symbolic ideas, Church preferred to paint landscapes that portrayed the beauty of the American outdoors in realistic detail.

After Cole died in 1848, Church set his own pace as a painter. He spent summers exploring the countryside and making sketches that he turned into finished paintings in fall and winter. In the 1850s, Church equaled Cole's success with nature paintings that conveyed the drama of locations like Niagara Falls to people who had never seen them themselves. Photographers might capture more accurate detail than any painter could manage, but their small, colorless pictures couldn't match the power of Church's big canvases.

Frederic Church is remembered as part of the "Hudson River School" of landscape painters, but he wasn't just a local painter. Inspired by a German explorer's book about South America, he traveled there in 1853 to match the author's verbal portrait of the Andes Mountains with his painting skills. The landscape paintings he produced made American audiences imagine that they were seeing a distant country through a picture window.

In the 1860s, Church traveled and painted scenes from the icy regions of Labrador to the warm shores of Jamaica, and visited Greece and the Middle East. He also began to experiment with a different style of painting that relied less on precise detail than on the effects he could create with color and brushstrokes. He made enough money from his paintings to build a comfortable home near the Catskills called Olana, overlooking the Hudson River.

After 1877, when Church thought he had many creative years ahead of him, arthritis gradually left him unable to paint with his right arm. He tried painting with his left arm until arthritis made that limb equally useless. He lived without painting but continued to make creative improvements at Olana until his death on April 7, 1900. Frederic Church's home is now a historic site memorializing his place in the history of American art.

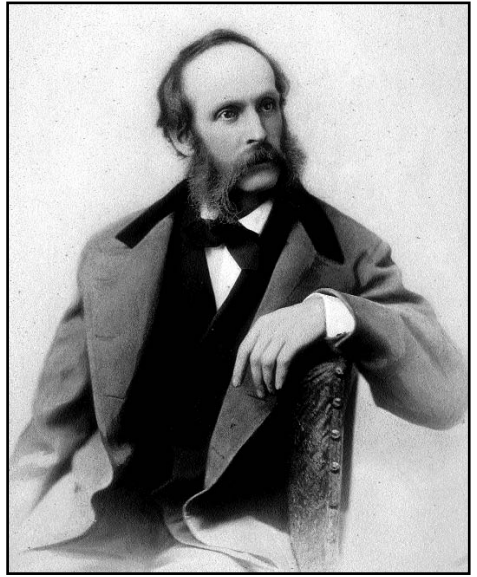


Photo provided by the Olana State Historical Site, Hudson, New York



Hudson, New York is on the eastern bank of the Hudson River approximately 40 miles south of Albany.

For more information about Frederic Church or visit his home Olana or go to www.olana.org and for detail about the Hudson River School of artists go to www.albanyinstitute.org/collections/hudson_river.htm

This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA - Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2003.