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Your Friend, Frederic E. Church

by Diane Shewchuk

On the 200th anniversary of the birth of Hudson River School painter Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900), *Your Friend, Frederic E. Church* celebrates an artist who built his home, Olana, less than forty miles south of Albany. The exhibition focuses on the friendship between Church and Albany-based artist Erastus Dow Palmer (1817-1904), a leading American sculptor of the second half of the nineteenth century. Church and Palmer wrote to each other regularly and visited frequently. Seventy-two letters written between 1867 and 1895 to "My dear Palmer" and signed,

"Your Friend Frederic E. Church" survive in the Albany Institute's collection.

The letters reveal a close bond between brother artists and their families. Church often reminds Palmer that it only takes an hour to get from Albany to Hudson by train: "Why can't you run down and give me a glimpse of your face?... I would like to have a good chat with you on various subjects." The letters also reveal the friendship between Isabel Church and Mary Palmer, wives of creative men who never stopped improving their properties and mothers who each suffered the loss of children. The letters also explore the relationship between Church and Palmer's son

Your Friend, Frederic E. Church is on view through October 12, 2026, at the Albany Institute of History & Art, 125 Washington Avenue, Albany, New York, 12210, 518-463-4478, www.albanyinstitute.org.

Walter Launt Palmer (1854-1932), who studied with Church and briefly shared a New York City studio with him.

Church owned ten works by Palmer—more than by any other artist. He lived with them at Olana and in his New York City studio. The letters show that the artists encouraged each other and reported to one another about their successes and failures. On January 1, 1863, Palmer wrote



All illustrated images are from the Albany Institute of History & Art unless otherwise stated.

ABOVE: Erastus Dow Palmer, *Imogen*, bronze, 1874, gift of Mrs. Katherine H. (Joseph) Gavit (not in the exhibition).

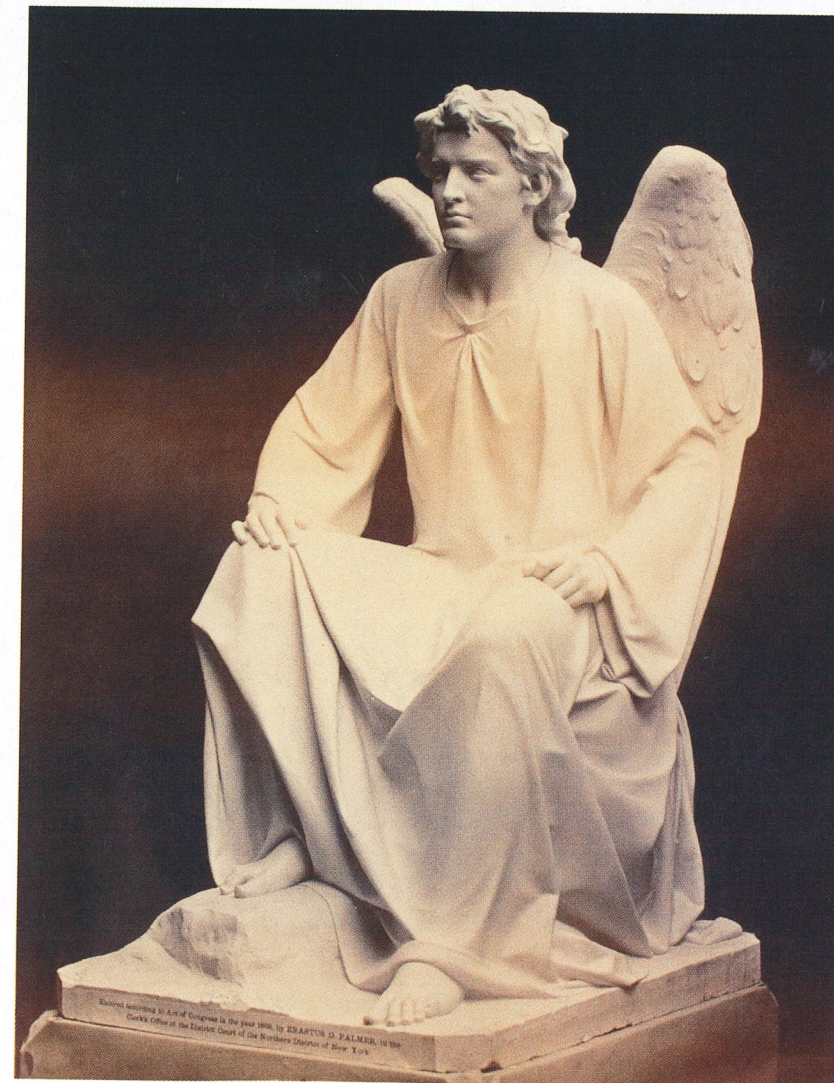
ABOVE RIGHT: Tompkins H. Matteson, *A Sculptor's Studio (Studio of Erastus Dow Palmer)*, 1857, o/c, 29 x 37 1/2 gift of Walter Launt Palmer.

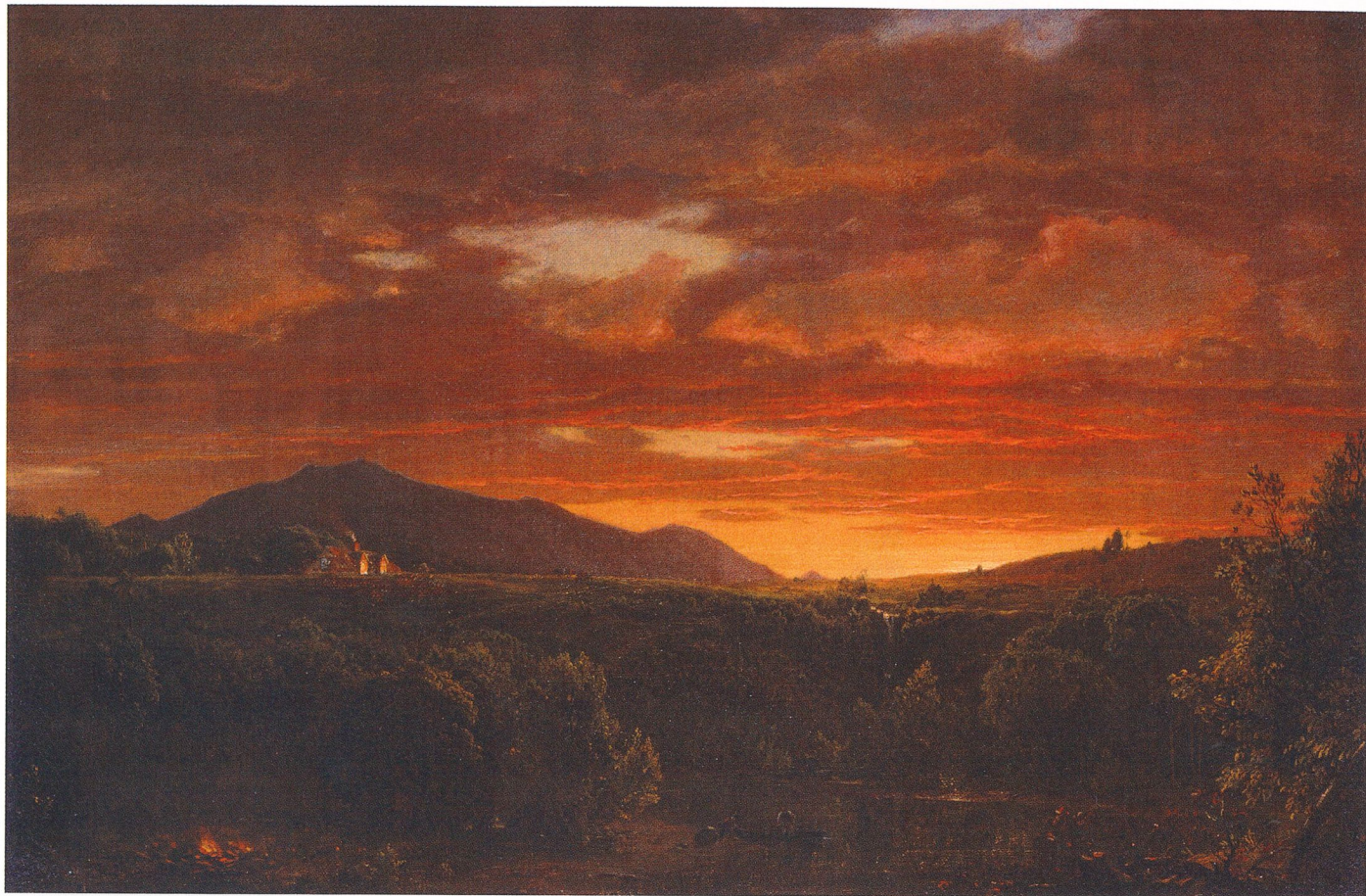
RIGHT: Unidentified photographer, *The Angel at the Sepulchre* by Erastus Dow Palmer, c. 1869, photographic print, 21 x 16 3/8, gift of Albert Roberts.

LEFT: Frederic E. Church, *Morning, Looking East Over the Hudson Valley from the Catskill Mountains*, 1848, o/c, 18 1/4 x 24, gift of Catherine Gansevoort Lansing.

to Church about a new sculpture he was carving in reaction to the Civil War:

My new bas-relief is progressing, slowly.... It is 5/8 the size of life and more than half length. 'Peace in bondage' I call it. I never made sorrow before as it is expressed in this head. It is not grief but sorrow and compassion.





ABOVE: Frederic E. Church, *Twilight (Sunset)*, 1856, o/c, 161/4 x 241/4, gift of Beatrice Palmer.

LEFT: Erastus Dow Palmer, *Peace in Bondage*, 1863, marble in original wood frame, 30 x 253/4 x 2, gift of Frederick Townsend.

ABOVE RIGHT: Walter Launt Palmer, *Road to Olana*, 1888, w/c and gouache on paper, 131/4 x 171/4, gift of the estate of Evelyn Newman.

RIGHT: Frederic E. Church, *Apple Blossoms*, 1870, oil on academy board, 115/8 x 181/4, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, Olana State Historic Site, gift of Olana Preservation, Inc. and Museum Purchase.

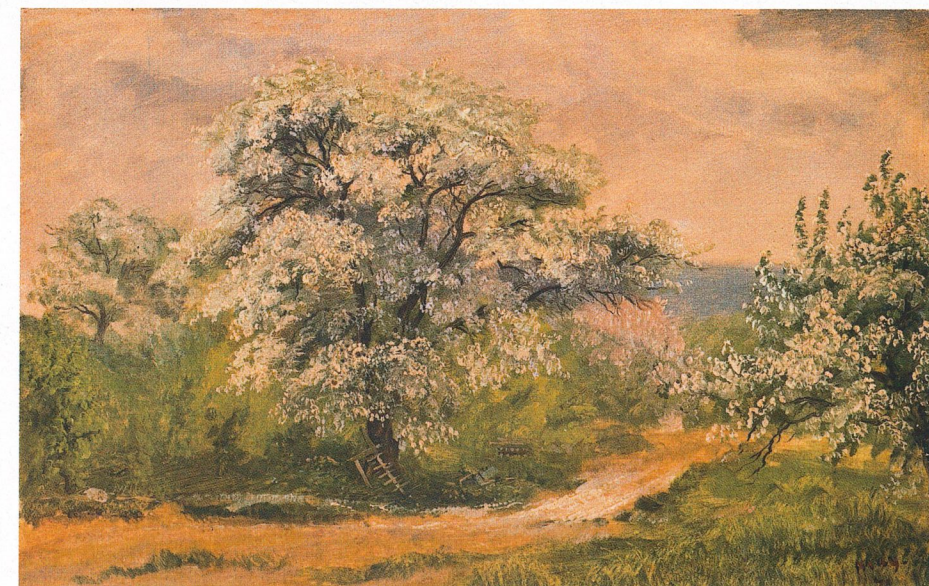
There are some things in it that I think have never been done in bas relief before. The head inclines forward or down, with the eye dinted apparently, to a point above the horizon which gives an expression of singular force which is heightened by the drooping leaves of the wreath projecting two inches or more in front beyond the head almost concealing the brow. The expression of the figure is thought to be quite in unison with that of the head.

Palmer considered *Peace in Bondage* to be his "very best bas-relief." It was first exhibited at Goupil's Gallery in New York City in 1863, and displayed again in Palmer's studio in 1864 as part of an exhibition in aid of the United States Sanitary Com-

mission. Valued at \$2,500, *Peace in Bondage* was raffled off for \$2.00 a ticket to benefit the war effort on April 6, 1864. The work was won by Sarah Rathbone Townsend, and her son donated it to the Albany Institute after his mother's death in 1910.

Palmer owned three paintings of sunsets by Church. One of them, *Twilight (Sunset)*, is described in a newspaper clipping in Palmer's scrapbook: "And over the mantel, hangs a brotherly gift from Church—a landscape, with sombre foreground, bold middle, sky whose troubled glow at once recalls the day and prophesies the night, and a profound harmony and humanity." Inscribed on the reverse is: "Painted January 1856 for E. D. Palmer by F. E. Church." On November 7, 1855, Palmer recorded in his account book that Church owed him \$200 for the bas-relief *Innocence*. Church settled the debt with this painting.

At the height of their careers, Church



and Palmer were lauded as great American artists. A reviewer opined: "These men are exclusively glories of our art. They are de-

velopments of American genius; manifestations of American character; they are imbued with American sentiment."