



HUNTINGTON FRONTIERS

FALL/WINTER 2006

Framed Again

NO PLANT LEFT BEHIND

THE BIBLE IN PICTURES

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens


FRAMED AGAIN

A FREDERIC CHURCH LANDSCAPE
RETURNS TO THE PERFECT SETTING

by Traude Gomez-Rhine



The Huntington's painting
Chimborazo, by Frederic Edwin
Church, in a new frame constructed
by Eli Wilner & Co. The canvas
alone measures 48 by 84 inches.
Photo by John Sullivan.



FOR MORE THAN 100 YEARS, Frederic Edwin Church's *Chimborazo* graced the New York City homes of William H. Osborn and his descendents. The luminous seven-foot-wide landscape had been in the family since Osborn acquired it from Church not long after the artist completed it in 1864. The friendship of the two men would remain strong right up until the famed Hudson River School artist died in Osborn's grand Park Avenue apartment in 1900.

In 1989 *Chimborazo* came west when The Huntington, with the help of the Virginia Steele Scott Foundation, obtained the prized work for its fledgling American art collection. Holding one of the last major Church paintings in a private collection, the Osborns had been courted by institutions around the country. Now Southern California could claim a monumental canvas by a painter who had never reached California in person.

Inspired by the ideas of the German scientist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), who wrote of the pristine beauty of South America, Church traveled to Ecuador's Mount Chimborazo in 1853 and 1857, making dozens of sketches of the mountain and region while documenting its trees and lowland plants with almost a scientific scrutiny. With *Chimborazo*, Church combined his empirical interests in botany with a cosmic, transcendent view of nature, and his epic landscape continues to impress viewers as it did when it was exhibited to critical acclaim in London in 1865.

But something wasn't quite right when *Chimborazo* was safely installed in The Huntington's Virginia Steele Scott Gallery of American Art. The frame had a lemony hue that wasn't well suited to the painting. "The bright gilding made *Chimborazo* appear dark by contrast," says Jessica Todd Smith,

The Huntington's Virginia Steele Scott Curator of American Art. Though its style was historically appropriate, the frame was clearly newer—made in the 20th century—and not original to the painting.

Just as a hairstyle can complement a face or a wall color transform a room, a frame can profoundly alter the appearance of a painting. Church (1826–1900) understood this; as far as he was concerned, the painting needed to "harmonize with the frame," as he once wrote. In fact, Church wasn't merely an accomplished artist, he was a serious frame designer who cared deeply about the presentation of his paintings. Most 19th-century artists left the details of framing to others, unlike their European counterparts who have a long history of exploring frame design. James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) was one of the few American exceptions to this rule. (More American artist-framers would come into prominence by the early 20th century.)

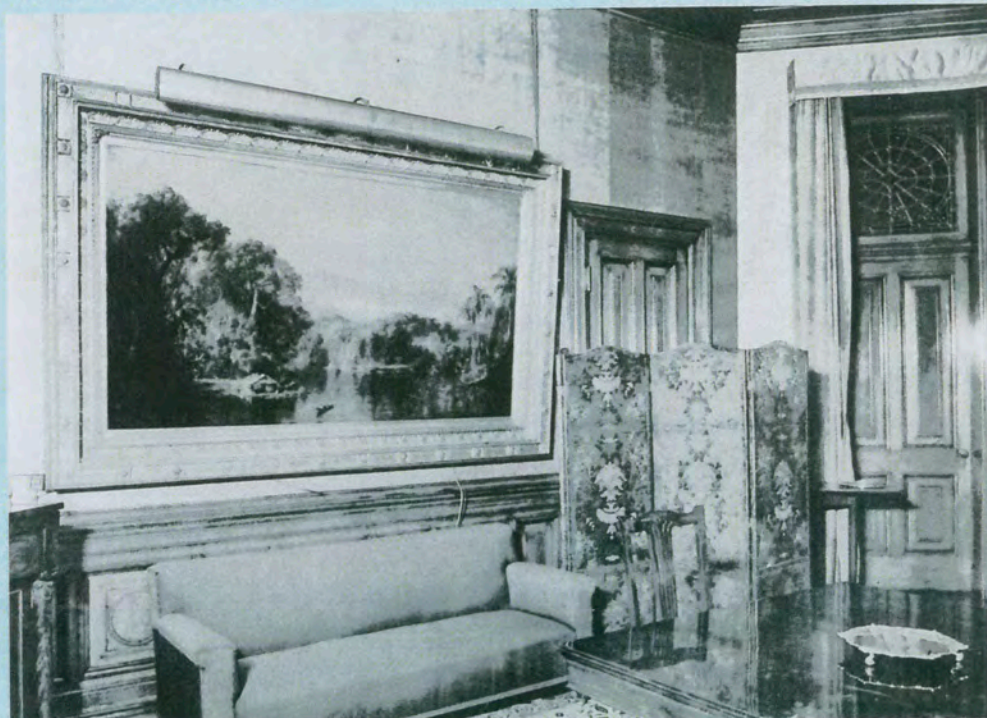
Church was also a natural showman and shrewd marketer who cleverly built public excitement for his work. He

regularly sent his paintings on tour, earning extra income by selling tickets to viewers. For Church, the frame was a window that led the viewer deeper into a painting. "Frederic Church gave a great deal of consideration to impressing the viewer with his work," says Smith. "While he could not always control the environment in which his paintings were displayed, he could at least surround them with frames that showed them at their best."

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Church certainly hadn't intended *Chimborazo* to be viewed in a frame that was too bright, too yellow. Amy Meyers, The Huntington's curator of American art when *Chimborazo* arrived in 1989, determined a new frame was in order. In 1998 she asked the esteemed Eli Wilner & Co. in New York City to design and craft a frame that might

Below: *Chimborazo* hanging in the dining room of William H. Osborn, New York, ca. 1865–70, from the archives of the Frederick Osborn family. *Above left:* The frame that arrived with *Chimborazo* when The Huntington acquired the painting in 1989.



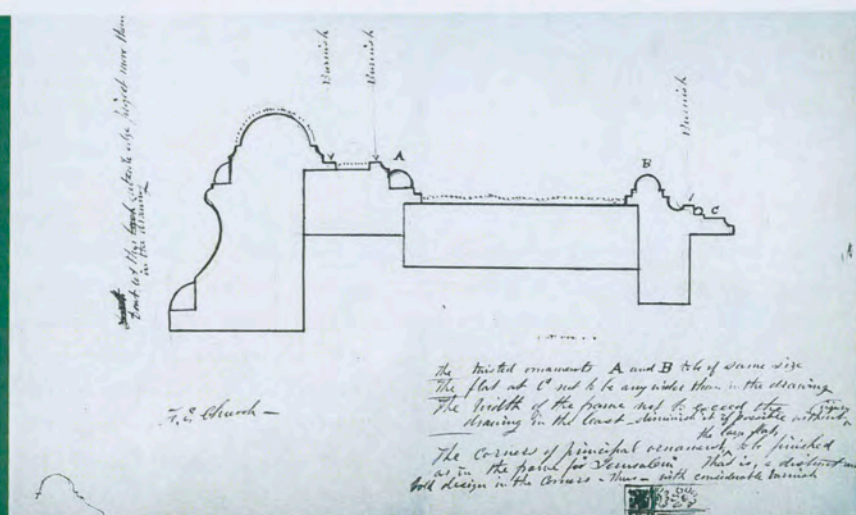
match Church's own conception of the proper border. Meyers brainstormed with Suzanne Smeaton, gallery director at Wilner, about how Church might have intended to frame the painting, based on his other frame designs.

A lucky break for the project came a year later when William Osborn's great-grandson Frederick discovered some old family photos and sent them to Meyers. There was the painting in an intricately ornate, gilded frame, on display in two different homes at different points in its 100-year stay with the family.

If this was the original frame, when had it been removed, and where had it gone? In the 1970s the high cost of insuring *Chimborazo* had prompted the Osborn family to arrange its long-term loan to an East Coast museum. Had a curator there separated it from its frame? Had someone in the family? Meyers implored the family to look in the attic or barn on their property, but no frame turned up. Meyers then showed the photographs to Smeaton. "I immediately recognized the frame style as a specific design," Smeaton says. "It was nearly identical to one on another Church painting. I knew with certainty it had been designed by Frederic Church himself."

The Church painting that Smeaton remembered was *The Vale of St. Thomas, Jamaica* (1867), at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Conn. Church had verifiably designed its frame. The primary bands of ornament in both frames were identical.

Eli Wilner & Co. had previously worked with the Atheneum, and it drew on this relationship when it struck a deal with the curator: Eli Wilner staff would conduct minor restoration on the frame of *The Vale of St. Thomas*, and the Atheneum would allow them to use that frame as a prototype, even to dismantle it to study its construction. With this model and the photographs,



What's in a Frame?

Eli Wilner & Co. employed some of the same processes that have been used for centuries in frame construction:

Wooden Substrate, or Basic Form

First, craftsmen milled the wood pieces that form the "bones" of the frame. They then fitted these wood sections together into the frame's skeletal form.

Molded Design Motifs and Elements

Most 19th-century American frames consist of wooden substrates embellished with applied ornaments that were made from a material called composition, or compo—a moldable mixture of chalk, resins, linseed oil, and glue, which dried hard and could be used in place of the labor-intensive process of hand carving. Today, however, Eli Wilner & Co. uses its own proprietary material (similar to plaster) in place of compo. Artisans cast the design elements of the *Chimborazo* frame directly from the *Vale of St. Thomas* frame, using molds made from silicon rubber. They then affixed these new ornaments to the wood frame, intricately fitting them together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Gilding and Finishing

Craftsmen then applied a thin liquid plaster called gesso, essentially chalk mixed with glue and water. Six to eight coats are generally required to build up a 1/6th-inch of gesso. The sanded gesso surface is then painted with bole, liquid clay that provides another layer of porosity as well as the color that will shine through the gold leaf. Bole on 19th-century American frames was usually blue-gray in color, although red, yellow, brown, and white have also been used in different eras. Indeed, Smeaton explains that red bole in the previous *Chimborazo* frame indicated a modern reproduction and rendered the frame too bright.

Craftsmen affixed 23-karat gold leaf with a mixture called gilder's liquor—alcohol, water, and glue. They then polished selected areas of the frame with a tool called a burnisher, usually made with an agate stone, to create reflective highlights and contrast with the matte areas.

Finally, craftsmen applied a patina to make the frame look old and authentic. "This is the most challenging aspect of the gilder's craft," says Smeaton. The artisans all have their recipes—combinations of dyes, tints, and paints. "It's important that the frame look like it has always been on the painting."

Above: Frederic Edwin Church's sketch of a picture frame in profile, mid 1870s. Collection Olana State Historic Site, New York State Office of Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation.

a reproduction of the Church-designed frame was possible, and *Chimborazo* would once again be displayed in the manner intended by the artist.

Why someone had removed the original frame remains a mystery, but the answer may lie in the fact that 19th-century American frames fell victim to the shifting tastes of the art world in the early 20th century. With modernism and minimalism, a taste for simplicity reigned. "A frame as ornate as *Chimborazo's* may have looked dated, heavy, and old-fashioned," says Smith. Indeed, American frames of the mid-to late 19th century became so passé to gallery owners and curators that they routinely took them off and stacked them in basements or sent them to junk stores. In some cases crafty scavengers salvaged the frames for their gold content, and in the process destroyed them forever.

Museums don't necessarily treat frames as accessioned objects—separate from the artwork that is a documented part of the collection—so their whereabouts aren't always tracked. Galleries often reframe works of art, depending on the styles and needs dictated by the market and their clients. Private collectors, of course, always have used reframing as a way to personalize their artwork as well as to display their decorating tastes.

But the tides turned by the 1980s, with a revival of interest in 19th-century American art. "In the last 10 years in particular, people have really started to see frames as historical objects," says Smeaton. "Museums, curators, collectors, and dealers now give great thought and attention to the historical appropriateness of frame styles."

As evidence, Eli Wilner's Long Island City workshop is in a perpetual swirl of activity as growing numbers of museums and galleries reunite American paintings with appropriate period frames. It was here that as many as 11 craftspeople worked on the new *Chimborazo* frame, spending more than 300 hours regenerating Church's original vision. Put on hold in 2001 when Meyers left The Huntington, the reframing project finally reached completion under the watch of Smith, who put the job on the fast track when The Huntington signed on as a venue for the exhibition "Treasures from Olana: Landscapes by Frederic Edwin Church." The project was also made possible through a gift from actor Steve Martin, who gave The Huntington \$1 million to support its American art collection and exhibitions.

Chimborazo's new frame was shipped from New York on a truck and arrived at The Huntington in early August 2006. A few weeks later the switch was made.

Smith stood in the Scott Gallery and nervously watched as Exhibits Manager Gregg Bayne and a crew gingerly removed *Chimborazo* from its old frame and set it into the new. The first sigh of relief came when the painting actually fit; with construction having taken place across the country, the potential for a miscalculation was real. Bayne and his crew secured *Chimborazo* in its frame, and breaths were held again as the crew heaved the heavy canvas onto its wall hooks.

The impact of the new frame on the painting was immediate and dramatic, and it was readily apparent to those in the room how the old frame never possessed the proper muscle to support such a monumental canvas. The layers of ornamentation have great drama and texture, and yet the detail doesn't overwhelm the painting, but rather enhances it, says Smith. The frame's stepped cove leads the eye into the spatial depth of the painting, and the warm tones of the gilding accentuate the luminous golden tones of the mountains that occupy its center. Church's cumulus clouds, overshadowed by the bright gold of the other frame, pop out around the landscape's edges. "The result is glorious," says Smith. ∞

Traude Gomez-Rhine is a staff writer at The Huntington.

Treasure from The Huntington

"Treasures from Olana: Landscapes by Frederic Edwin Church" is on view in The Huntington's Boone Gallery until Jan. 3, 2007. It features 18 works from Olana, the home of Church in Hudson, N.Y., which became a National Historic Landmark in 1970. This exhibition marks the first time that these works have traveled as a group. The Huntington supplements this traveling exhibition with an object-in-focus display of *Chimborazo*. This section also features 19th-century objects from the Library collections not usually on public display, including editions of Alexander von Humboldt's books. Object labels also link the plants depicted in *Chimborazo* to specimens in The Huntington's Botanical Gardens.



On the Cover

Inspired by the ideas of German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900) traveled to South America in the 1850s to make dozens of pencil sketches of Ecuador's Mount Chimborazo. In 1864, he celebrated the mountain by naming a monumental painting after it. Church was just as meticulous in designing the frames he used for canvases, however the frame he planned for *Chimborazo* has since been lost to history.

In this issue we describe how curators and artisans reconstructed a frame for *Chimborazo* that is faithful to the artist's original vision. The painting, newly framed, is on display in the MaryLou and George Boone Gallery in conjunction with the exhibition "Treasures from Olana: Landscapes by Frederic Edwin Church" through Jan. 3, 2007. The painting will then return to its permanent location in the Virginia Steele Scott Gallery of American Art.

Photos by John Sullivan



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