

Robert Seldon Duncanson: A Forgotten Landscapist

Robert Seldon Duncanson was an American landscape painter from the nineteenth century, and the first African American to be renowned internationally¹. Though there is controversy regarding his descentance, it is known for certain that he was born in Seneca County in Fayette, New York in 1821 to John Dean and Lucy Duncanson². Duncanson grew up in Monroe, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, where he learned trade skills such as home painting and carpentry³. Around 1840, Duncanson left Monroe for Cincinnati, Ohio to pursue a career as an artist⁴. Being located right on the border between Ohio and Kentucky during a time when slavery was a contentious issue, a few of his works are regarded by some as a metaphor for its abolishment. Though there is controversy over this, any perspective regarding the interpretations of his works should be considered. Even though Duncanson did have a harder time than other white painters of his time making a living from his works, his race did eventually have a positive influence on how he would be able to profit from his hard work. Charles Avery, an abolitionist, commissioned Duncanson to paint, “Cliff Mine, Lake Superior”, kickstarting his art career in 1848⁵. Eventually, his work drew the attention of sponsors, namely Nicholas Longworth, who sponsored his first trip to Europe, where his work was then influenced by the landscape and literature. After moving around the country to avoid the Civil War, he traveled back to Europe in 1865. Upon returning, his struggle with mental health ultimately led to his death in Detroit in 1872.

The Hudson River School described the group of American landscape painters between 1825 and 1870 -- an extension to Romantic art⁶. Unlike Romantic artists, this is a group of painters who focused on the beauty of nature rather than its preeminence over humans. These painters conveyed nature in a different way to set themselves apart from the paradigms of European paintings as well, creating a niche for themselves and establishing the identity of American art at the time. They drew inspiration from the New England area, and in particular, the Hudson River Valley, thus giving the group of artists the name of the Hudson River School⁷. Prominent artists of this group include the likes of John Kensett, Worthington Whittredge, and

¹ “Duncanson, Robert Seldon.”

² Julie Aronson, “Robert S. Duncanson”

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Lucinda Moore, “America’s Forgotten Landscape Painter”

⁶ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Hudson River School,”

⁷ Ibid

Thomas Cole, who is considered to be the founder and one of the leaders of the Hudson River School⁸.

The emergence of the Hudson River School gave way to many paintings depicting the grandeur of nature -- whether it be the omnipotent power that nature held over mere mortal humans that extended from Romantic art, or the beautiful, vast, harmonious expanse of it. With inspiration drawn from artists such as Thomas Cole, Robert Seldon Duncanson created works that reflected nature's splendor, richness, and vastness, while addressing the racial issues of the time.

Duncanson was primarily a self-taught artist who learned by sketching nature, painting portraits, and copying existing works⁹. He traveled between Cincinnati, Detroit, and Monroe to make ends meet as an artist in his early career, similar to other African American artists at the time who had to actively seek commissions¹⁰. One of

his early works is *Vulture and Its Prey*:

This painting features, as the title states, a vulture attacking its prey on a tree stump. The painting's background seems to intentionally be darker than the birds in the center, in order to focus the reader's view. This scene appears to take place on a high elevation, indicated by the cliffside on the left. The sky is greyed out, with a disarrayed brushstroke, which could possibly be an indication of Duncanson's skill at the time, or even to emphasise the disarray this painting has.

The vulture is pictured pinning the smaller bird down, already tearing it up, demonstrated by the blue fragments in the vulture's mouth and the small smudge of red on the blue bird. Through this work does not appear to contain any racial connotation, it does



Fig. 1 *Vulture and Its Prey* (1844)

show a considerable level of skill for an artist without a formal education. The focus on the birds are magnified by the extra detail that Duncanson put into them, seen in the spots on the vulture's wings and body, as well as the black to blue gradient on the smaller bird.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Joseph D. Ketner, *The Emergence of the African American Artist*

¹⁰ Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art*



Fig. 2 *Mount Healthy, Ohio* (1844)

Mount Healthy, Ohio is one of the first landscape paintings Duncanson completed. This work features a home on a private property surrounded by a forest. In the foreground, there is a man with a gun and dog chasing after something off to the right, away from the line of sight of the viewer. Behind them is a fence that surrounds the white house, which most likely represents a private property. There is a couple in front of the house on a path, looking behind the house, seemingly to the white tower deep in the background.

In addition to centering the home in the painting, Duncanson created a high level of contrast between the home and surrounding greenery, even lightening the color of the path in front of the home to make it more pronounced. The home also acts like a bridge connecting the greenery to the light blue sky. The brushstrokes look much more clean and intentional compared to the ones made in *Vulture and Its Prey*. There is clear attention to detail seen in the subtle shapes of the clouds, as well as the variation in the colors of the trees.

The hunter and his dog can be interpreted as someone hunting for wild game, or by others, perhaps as someone recapturing a slave. Mount Healthy is nearby Kentucky, however about 20 miles away from the border, so this may not be the case even if Duncanson's works can be interpreted in ways regarding slavery. If one were to interpret this painting with regard to slavery, it could represent a slave fleeing from Kentucky to Ohio, which was a free state. The couple looking off into the distance by the bright home could represent the brighter future that being free in Ohio would bring escaped slaves.

The work that kick started his career was *Cliff Mine, Lake Superior*:

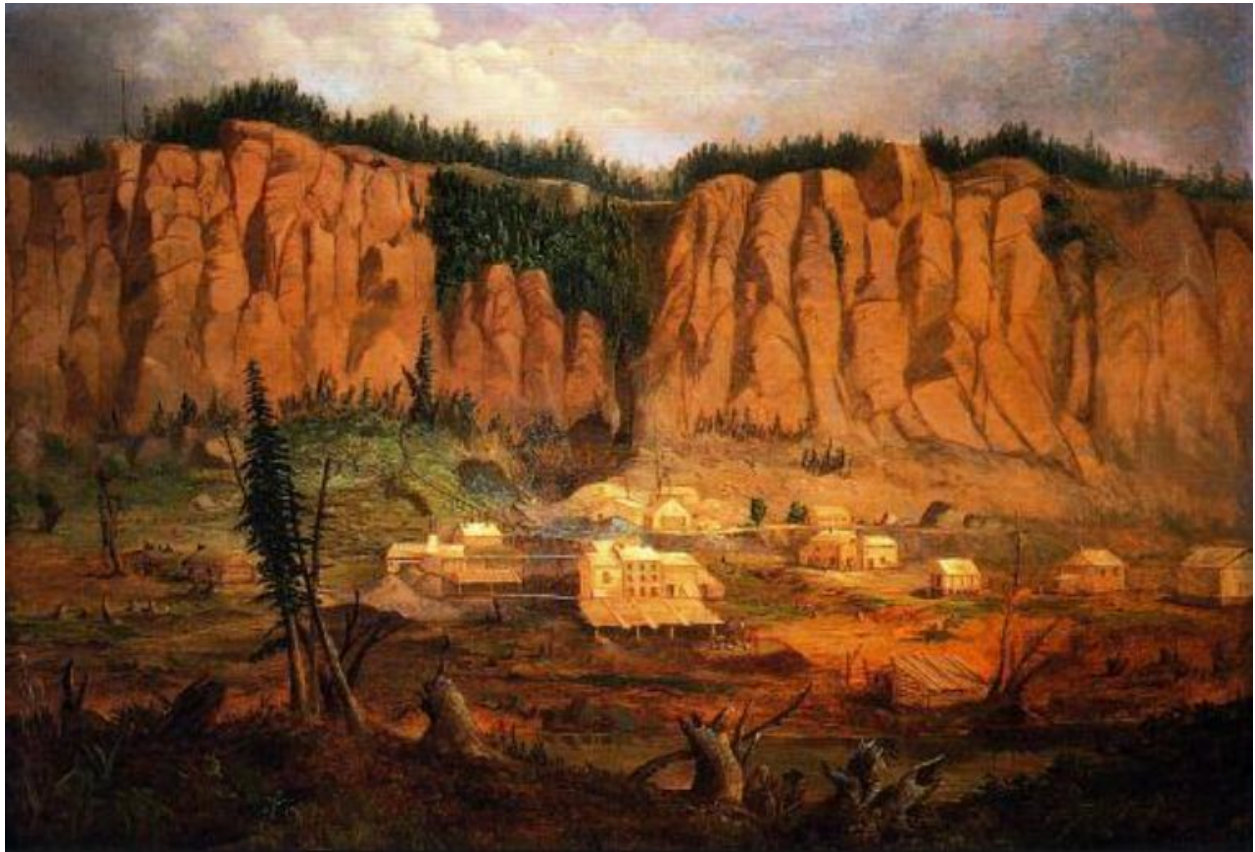


Fig. 3 *Cliff Mine, Lake Superior* (1848)

This was commissioned by and painted for Charles Avery, a slavery abolitionist in 1848¹¹. *Cliff Mine, Lake Superior* connected Duncanson to other abolitionists who would later also support him. This work captures a much larger scene, including a cliffside and small established town near it. The foreground contains what appears to be the ruins of a forest, indicated by the tree stumps and thin trees. This is contrasted by the dense treeline on the cliffside. The desolate foreground and new establishment may be indicative of human inhabitation of untouched nature, with the large treeline being untouched by people. Unlike the previous painting, the colors in this painting feel

¹¹ Moore, Lucinda. "America's Forgotten Landscape Painter"

more dull. However, this contains a high level of detail, as seen by the smaller features such as the windows, fencing, rocks, and shading.

Cincinnati From Covington, Kentucky is a painting that shows the role slaves had in a slave state:



Fig. 4 *Cincinnati From Covington, Kentucky* (1850)

In the foreground, we see a black man holding a scythe next to two white children. In the background there is a black woman hanging laundry. These indicate the roles that slaves had in Kentucky, compared to the life in the industrialized Cincinnati. There are dead trees lying in the foreground by the children and man, with more greenery further back, before transitioning through an empty field to the big city. The smoke coming from all the buildings in the city make it clear of the industrialization of the area, contrasting the more rural south where slavery was prevalent and pivotal to the economy.



Fig. 5 *Landscape with Waterfall* (1853)

This painting was created with demonstrating the expanse of nature in mind. This landscape features rich greenery, with a peaceful body of water, and a vast mountain range in the background fading, making the painting feel larger than it is. In the foreground, Duncanson paints a large tree off to the right in front of a waterfall that empties into a still body of water. The trees on either side of the painting funnel the viewer to focus on the vast land that lies behind it, leading to the everlasting mountain range that extends into the sky. The sparse clouds contradicting the dense greenery further create a feeling of how vast the sky is as well.



Fig. 6 Chapultepec Castle (1860)

This painting depicts the landscape surrounding the Chapultepec Castle in Mexico. On top of the castle, we can see a Mexican flag. In the foreground, we see two groups of people: what appears to be a soldier on horseback and then another group of men and women. The group of men and women seem to be around a fire indicated by the smoke, with one man playing an instrument, another two people watching over the fire, and the last two women talking to the soldier. There are signs of religious influence as well, shown by the cross near the men and one on the bridge off to the right. Behind the people in the foreground is a swamp covered with some greenery, before approaching the viaducts and then the castle. Similar to the previous painting, this also feels as though Duncanson tries to focus the reader's focus by filling in the edges of the painting with greenery, funneling it to the main feature of the work -- in this case, the castle. On the ground by the viaducts preceding the castle, there appears to be a group of soldiers holding flags on horseback approaching the castle. Beyond the castle are more buildings leading up to the mountainside. Like a few of his

previous works, Duncanson creates a vast green landscape, featuring man-made creations set in nature, with a background that fades into the sky.

Around the time of the Civil War, Duncanson was much more mobile, traveling to avoid the fighting. *On the St. Annes, East Canada* is likely the result of this:



Fig. 7 *On the St. Annes, East Canada* (1865)

This painting is a little different from the others that Duncanson has done before. Unlike them, *On the St. Annes, East Canada* contains much more variation in color--this time with more orange and yellow foliage, so we can tell that it is Fall. The foreground features a rushing river with rocks scattered. Duncanson again uses foliage to focus the painting off into the distance, transitioning to the sky. Duncanson's ability to show minor details is also present, seen in the differences among the trees' leaves, allowing them to each be identifiable. There are two people along the right side of the river, just barely visible, as to represent the insignificance humans had to the splendor of nature. They are mere witness to the landscape that envelopes them.

As a painter of the Hudson River School, Duncanson used his works not only to demonstrate how breathtaking nature's beauty is and its superiority to humans, but also in some works represented the lives of slaves in antebellum America. With large sections of foliage, tall, overhanging trees, extended cliff sides and treelines, and a hybrid of peaceful yet powerful waters, Duncanson represents the power and magnificence of nature. With his inclusion of people and man-made creations

present, he depicts the existence of humans as minor relative to nature, especially later in his career. We can see this in *Chapultepec Castle* and *On the St. Annes, East Canada*, where nature's presence is greater than those of the people present. Even the castle in *Chapultepec Castle* appears to be far smaller than the nature that surrounds it, despite it being a castle. The large group of soldiers are shrunk, further demonstrating this. The grand, yet subtly painted mountainous terrain in the backgrounds of both paintings combined with the striking inclusion of the trees and other greenery that controls the viewer's focus shows the attention that Duncanson puts into his works to capture the features of nature that showcase its wonders.

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