On January 20, 2021, just moments after the formal inauguration of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., an inaugural gift-giving ceremony took place in the Capitol Rotunda. President and Mrs. Biden were presented with “Landscape with Rainbow,” an 1859 painting by Robert S. Duncanson, an African-American artist. (Photo above courtesy of PBS.) First Lady Jill Biden had helped select this particular painting for the event. She felt that the rainbow in the painting was a good omen. “I like the rainbow,” she said. “Good things to follow.” The choice of this particular painting resonated with President Biden’s inaugural address in which he was referencing the start of a new era in the White House.
Robert S. Duncanson painted “Landscape with Rainbow” in 1859 while living in Cincinnati, across the river from the slave state of Kentucky. The painting was on loan from the Smithsonian for the inauguration day ceremony in the U.S. Capitol, and was returned to the museum after the event.\(^1\)

Duncanson has been recognized as “the best landscape painter in the West,” and as one of the greatest African American artists. This international acclaim was at a time when many blacks in the United States were still enslaved.\(^2\) Although he was beloved by 19\(^{th}\) century audiences around the world, this African-American artist fell into obscurity. In recent years, however, there have been renewed efforts to celebrate his genius.\(^3\) A huge television audience watching the January 20, 2021 event in the Rotunda saw Duncanson’s painting. Media reports about his painting on view in that event have added to a renewed interest in Duncanson and his paintings.

The popularity arising from the January 20, 2021 display of Duncanson’s painting was soon acted upon by the Rotary Club of Monroe, Michigan. Duncanson had lived in Monroe, Michigan from 1828 until 1840. That Rotary Club and several museums, art and historical societies in spring 2021 launched a multi-state project to honor Robert S. Duncanson in 2021 and 2022.

**Early Life**

Robert Scott Duncanson\(^1\) was born sometime in 1821 in the town of Fayette, in Seneca County, NY. His mother was Lucy Nickles, a free African American from Cincinnati, Ohio, and his father, John Dean Duncanson, from Virginia was of African and possibly Scottish descent.\(^2\) Robert’s grandfather was Charles Duncanson, who was an emancipated slave from Virginia. It is believed that he was one of the 37 slaves that Robert Selden Rose had brought with him in 1803 when he moved his family and possessions from his plantation in Virginia to what became known as the Rose Hill farm.

Although born in the town of Fayette in Seneca County, NY, Duncanson spent much of his early youth in Canada. In 1828, his father, John Dean Duncanson, a skilled carpenter and housepainter, moved his family to Monroe Michigan, a rapidly growing town. John Dean Duncanson had considerable success working as a housepainter and carpenter, enough success to support his family and educate his children. Robert helped his father’s business work by assisting with work on ornate trim and signs. Robert and his 4 brothers apprenticed in the family trades of house painting and carpentry. In 1838, Robert established a painting business with partner John Gamblin. In 1839, Robert suspended the business to pursue his ambition to work as a portrait painter.\(^4\)

**A Painter in Cincinnati**

That work helped to develop his painting skills, but he really wanted to be a landscape painter. About 1840, he moved to Mt. Healthy, a small but thriving neighborhood in Cincinnati, and was a center of culture and abolitionist sentiment among free Blacks. In 1840, Cincinnati had a population of 43,000 of which about

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\(^1\) There is some question as to what is his proper middle name. Some sources use “Seldon” as his middle name while other sources use “Scott.” If his middle name really was “Seldon,” it would help to link his father to being the “John Duncan” or “Duncansen” who was one of the enslaved persons that Robert Selden Rose brought with him when Rose moved his family to what became Rose Hill Manor in the town of Fayette. That would help to explain how Robert and his parents were living in the town of Fayette in Seneca County, NY.

\(^2\) It is very possible that Robert S. Duncanson’s father was not of Scottish descent.
3000 were African Americans, many of whom had been previously enslaved. Cincinnati was considered a “south town on free soil” and was often referred to as the “Athens of the West” and the “emporium of the West” because of its strong arts community. Cincinnati provided its free black population with much greater access to opportunities for advancement than in other parts of antebellum America.5

In Mt. Healthy he lived with the Reuben Graham family, who were also descendants of Virginian slaves. He began his life as an artist by copying popular art prints and then moved on to painting original portraiture.6 He also worked in photography—which at that time was a burgeoning new phenomenon—using the daguerreotype printing process.7 To make ends meet, he essentially became an itinerant portrait artist, looking for work between Cincinnati, Monroe and Detroit.8 He developed his landscape painting skills by doing scenes of the Ohio River Valley. By 1842 his painting were being exhibited in the Cincinnati area. His landscape paintings were greatly influenced by the Hudson River School painters in that he strove for “romantic, un tarnished images of America’ natural landscapes.”9 His passion for landscape painting led to a friendship with William Sonntag, one of Cincinnati’s leading practitioners of the Hudson River School of landscape painting. Sonntag and Duncanson did their painting in adjacent rooms in the Apollo Building.10

Cincinnati was an ideal place for Duncanson to develop as an important landscape artist. Cincinnati was a thriving hub of artistic expression. Duncanson had great support from both black and white abolitionists, whom he depicted in portraits. His first significant painting was “Cliff Mine, Lake Superior;” (shown at left above) executed in 1848 and commissioned by abolitionist clergyman Charles Avery. That painting and his 1851 painting “Blue Hole, Flood Waters, Little Miami River” (shown at right) established his status as one of the region’s most important painters.11

Nicholas Longworth, another abolitionist and wealthy Cincinnati landowner, helped to expand Duncanson’s artistic career well beyond Ohio. In 1851, Longworth commissioned Duncanson to paint 8 elaborate landscape murals and 2 floor vignettes to adorn the Longworth family estate, Belmont. That estate today is the Taft Museum of Art and Duncanson’s paintings are one of the biggest pre-Civil War domestic murals in the United States. This assignment was the largest and the most ambitious of his career and provided him with the money to finance a trip to Europe to expand his artistic skills and knowledge.12

(The pictures below show two of these Belmont murals.)
His Painting in the 1850s

In 1853, Duncanson went on a 9-month tour of England, France and Italy, along with his friend and fellow landscape artist William Louis Sonntag. This trip to Europe was the first by an African American artist. What he learned from that first trip prompted him to make several subsequent trips, each adding new elements to his work. In England he was particularly attracted to the landscapes of Claude Lorrain and J.M.W. Turner. Surprisingly, when he returned to Cincinnati from that first trip to Europe he became the proprietor of a photography studio. The following year, however, he switched from photography to painting full-time.

Besides incorporating elements of European artists into his artwork, the time he spent among intellectual artists and committed opponents to slavery on these European trips spurred Duncanson’s abolitionist feelings. In the years before the Civil War he increasingly donated paintings to abolitionist causes and personally participated in several demonstrations and activist rallies. During the 1850s, Duncanson also worked as the principal artist—executing oil paintings from daguerreotypes—in the city’s foremost daguerrean studio with owner James Presley Ball, a fellow African-American. Both men had African-Americans living with them who listed themselves as painters or daguerreans.

Duncanson is believed to have helped create the images in the anti-slavery presentation “Ball’s Splendid Mammoth Pictorial Tours of the United States.” Displayed in theaters across the country, the 600-yard-wide panorama that utilized narration and special sound and lighting effects to portray the horrors of human bondage from capture and trans-Atlantic passage to slave markets and escape to Canada. Though Duncanson never overtly addressed racial issues in his paintings, subtle messages appear in his works. In his painting View of Cincinnati, Ohio from Covington, Kentucky, for example, Duncanson contrasted blacks laboring alongside the Ohio River on Kentucky’s slave plantations (while whites lounged leisurely on a hillside) with the prosperity and freedom that loomed across the river in Ohio.

Just as the Civil War broke out in 1861, Duncanson completed what many critics and historians believe to be his “magnum opus”—“Land of the Lotus Eaters.” Inspired by Tennyson and Homer, this large landscape is populated with blacks attending to the needs of white soldiers. This painting was hailed as a “prescient masterpiece of the struggle to save the union and end slavery.”

Montreal during the Civil War

Because of the Civil War, Duncanson left the United States and went to Montreal, Canada with plans to then go on to Europe. Apparently he went to Canada to avoid having to obtain a diplomatic passport required for persons of color traveling abroad. He spent more than 2 productive years in Canada. There he helped foster a school of landscape painting, especially influencing Canadian artists such as Otto Jacobi and C.J. Way, as well as his own pupil Allan Edson. He worked with the prestigious gallery of William Notman, who was known as the “Photographer of the Queen,” to promote arts and culture. He was heralded as a “cultivator of the arts in Canada” and, given having spent early years in his youth in Canada, he was perceived as a native son. It wasn’t until 1865 that Duncanson actually left Canada for the British Isles.

Welcomed in Europe

In his second trip to Europe, he was welcomed again by the European artistic and aristocratic communities. The greatness of his painting “Land of the Lotus Eaters” was admired throughout Europe. The Queen of England purchased some of his paintings. Duncanson visited Alfred Lord Tennyson at his home on the Isle of Wight. Tennyson was England’s poet laureate. Duncanson brought with him his most celebrated painting “Land of the Lotus Eaters” (shown at right) that was partially based on a poem by Tennyson.
Tennyson was delighted by the painting and remarked, “Your landscape is a land in which one loves to wander and linger.”21 “The Land of the Lotus Eaters” eventually came to be owned by the king of Sweden. Duncanson became quite enchanted with the Scottish highlands of which he made a series of landscapes in the 1860s. An 1871 painting, “Ellen’s Isle, Loch Katrine” (shown below) is hailed as the artist’s final masterwork.22 This painting was inspired by Sir Walter Scott’s poem “The Lady of the Lake.”23

**Dementia and His Family**

In the late 1860s, Duncanson began to suffer from dementia, although he remained in good health physically. He was prone to sudden outbursts, erratic behavior and delusions to the point that by 1870 he imagined he was possessed by the spirit of a deceased artist. Some scholars suggest that the brooding mood and turbulent waters of his seascapes paintings, such as “Sunset on the New England Coast” and “A Storm off the Irish Coast,” reflected his disturbed mental state. His symptoms, as described by Duncanson’s contemporaries, had led to speculation that his condition was caused by lead poisoning, probably the result of his using large quantities of lead paint for his house painting work early in his adult life and then for many years as an artist.24 Despite his failing health, in 1871 he touted the United States with several historical works, price upward of $15,000 apiece.

His condition steadily worsened until he was placed in a sanitarium in Detroit, Michigan following a violent seizure in October 1872. He died there on December 21, 1872.25 He was buried in Woodland Cemetery in Monroe, Michigan in an unmarked grave on the family plot. In 2019 the Detroit Institute of Arts placed a tombstone for Robert S. Duncanson on the family plot. Five of Duncanson’s artwork are on display at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Dora Kelley, a local artist, had launched the fundraising campaign at a weekly meeting of the Detroit Fine Arts Breakfast Club. With $1,800 raised, an elaborate gravestone became possible.26 (Shown above are both sides of this gravestone.) Duncanson’s second wife Phoebe was biracial. The couple’s only child, a son named Mittie, was born in Cincinnati.27

**His Legacy**

Art historian Claire Perry, curator of the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s exhibit “The Great American Hall of Wonders” said Robert S. Duncanson “invented a unique place for himself that no other
African-American had attained at that time. It was a position as an eminent artist recognized both within the United States and abroad as a master.”28

Although dozens of Duncanson’s paintings survive in art institutions and private collections, after his death in 1872 his name faded into obscurity. An exhibition of his paintings at the Cincinnati Art Museum in 1972—the centennial of his death—helped restore his renown. Since then, his work has been the subject of several books, including art historian Joseph Ketner’s The Emergence of the African-American Artist, and recent art exhibitions. Ketner wrote, “Duncanson’s progression from a humble housepainter to recognition in the arts signaled the emergence of the African-American artist from a people predominantly relegated to laborers and artisans.”29

Duncanson rose above racial oppression and prejudice to create expressions of African American cultural identity, leading the way for other people of color to pursue careers in the arts.30 Duncanson was an “enterprising, self-taught landscape artist” who was “able to begin his career with the support of philanthropic abolitionists. He used “the fame he acquired to support the abolitionist cause and became the first African American landscape artist to earn truly international acclaim.”31 He envisioned for himself a “life without limits, a life beyond the role of the slave or laborer into which African-Americans had been cast. He instead case himself as an artist, propelling himself into the higher echelons of society, and forged a place in history as one of the greatest landscape painters of the 19th century. He was a phenomenon. He made choices, he was bold and he attained a status of prestige that was unprecedented in the United States. That took strength and trailblazing quality.”32

As indicated in the first section of this article, the Rotary Club of Monroe, Michigan and several museums, art and historical societies have built on the January 20, 2021 display of Duncanson’s “Landscape with Rainbow” painting to launch a multi-state effort to honor Robert S. Duncanson in 2021 and 2022.


www.columbia.edu/cu/wallach/exhibitions/Duncanson.html


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