



Today's Masterpiece: Robert S. Duncanson. [Catskill Landscape](#), ca. 1863. Oil on canvas. Gift of Mr. Legler Benbough, 1954.36.



Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute on Virtual SDMA**. I'm your host, **Dr. Michael Brown**, Curator of European Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in the first Friday of each month to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

Today's masterpiece is a magnificent landscape by Robert Duncanson, who was among the first Black artists to achieve international recognition during a time of national upheaval in the United States in the years leading up to the Civil War.

Born in Upstate New York in 1821, Duncanson was the grandson of an enslaved person in Virginia who had gained freedom and a military land grant, likely for his service in the Revolutionary War. Duncanson apprenticed with his father as a house painter, carpenter, and glazier, before developing his talents as a professional artist and relocating to Cincinnati around 1839. Duncanson, who also helped found a successful daguerreotype photography studio, won several important early painting commissions and garnered the patronage of local abolitionist leaders, who in 1853 sponsored his study tour of England, France, and Italy. Duncanson's letters attest to his esteem for JMW Turner, whom he called a "singular genius," and for the landscapes he studied in Florence and Rome.

Returning to Cincinnati and to glowing reviews of his paintings in the local press, Duncanson began planning an international tour of his monumental landscape paintings with stops in Toronto, Montreal, Glasgow and London. During the height of the Civil War from 1863 to 1865, Duncanson and his family moved to Montreal, where he soon entered into a collaboration with Canada's most famous artist at the time, photographer William Notman. Notman's photographs of Duncanson's landscapes, some retouched by Duncanson, were widely circulated, and together the two trailblazing artists helped establish the Canadian landscape tradition.

Duncanson's interest in photography, specifically the stereographic prints that Notman pioneered, informed his approach to atmospheric perspective and landscape composition, which often featured tiny figures in the foreground that invite the viewer into the scene. This is the case in the San Diego work, which is closely related to an oil sketch dated 1863 in the collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. The similarities between the two works, including solitary Indigenous figures looking out over the water, suggest that Duncanson may have depicted Quebec's Eastern Townships rather than the Catskills, as has traditionally been thought.

In the summer of 1865, Duncanson packed up an impressive selection of large-scale landscapes, including dramatic views of the Niagara and Montmorency Falls, and



sailed for England. After showing at the International Exhibition in Dublin, he made a sketching tour through the Scottish Highlands before arriving in London.

Already familiar in Britain through abolitionist journals, and among art collectors via Notman's popular photographs of his paintings, Duncanson's entrance into the London art world was highly anticipated. Among his patrons was Alfred, Lord Tennyson, whose poetry had inspired Duncanson's masterpiece, "Land of the Lotus Eaters," bought in London by the king of Sweden. The artist re-forged the poem's Homeric verses, imagining a time and place free of enslavement. Of his luminous landscapes, one prominent London critic wrote of "composition[s] of infinite skill ...wrought [by] a master in all, even the minutest of details."

Duncanson returned to Cincinnati a resounding artistic and commercial success - his landscapes sold for comparable prices to his contemporaries Albert Bierstadt and Frederick Edwin Church, but his work was impeded by failing health. He was able to make two last summer sketching trips through Canada in 1869 and 1870, constantly refining his luminous technique. Today, his landscapes can be seen at the National Galleries of both the US and Canada, the Metropolitan Museum, the MFA Boston, and Cleveland Museum of Art.

This has been Michael Brown with Masterpiece Minute, thanks for listening here on Virtual SDMA.



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