

COLLECTION CONNECTION

Duncanson's Murals in the Light of Luminism

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Luminist Horizons: The Art and Collection of James A. Suydam, an exhibition of serene, glowing 19th-century American landscapes, allows us to take a new perspective on the Taft Museum of Art's landscape murals by Robert S. Duncanson.

Duncanson's Murals and the Landscape Painting of His Time

Around 1850, Nicholas Longworth decided to commission murals for the foyer of his home, Belmont (the historic house that would later become the Taft Museum of Art). He bestowed this plum job on the young decorative painter, Robert Duncanson. This talented artist creatively melded the conventions of American mural décor, European pictorial wallpapers, and contemporary landscape painting while controlling factors of size and scale to suit the particulars of the space. The resulting suite of eight large paintings is considered one of the best examples of pre-Civil War domestic mural decoration.

Largely self-taught as a painter, Duncanson studied the great landscapes of his time. Among the works he might have admired is Asher B. Durand's *Landscape* of 1850 (fig. 1), which is in the exhibition. Yet how would Duncanson, who began as an itinerant housepainter, have known about such pictures? First, by means

of the many reproductive prints that circulated around the country, popularizing images from the nation's artistic capital, New York. Second, Duncanson became friendly with a group of local landscapists who included Worthington Whittredge and

William Sonntag. They transmitted the Hudson River School landscape style—invented by Thomas Cole and Durand—to Cincinnati around 1845. Finally, Duncanson saw Hudson River paintings at the exhibitions of the Western Art Union and read art periodicals that described the movement's aesthetics. The Hudson River landscapists presented the native scenery of the American wilderness through an idealizing lens informed by European 17th-century and British 19th-century landscape. Some Luminist artists sprang from the ranks of the Hudson River painters.

If we compare Durand's landscape with one of Duncanson's murals (fig. 2) from a year or two later, we see the younger Cincinnati adopting the general principles of the Hudson



Fig. 1. Asher B. Durand, *Landscape*, 1850, oil on canvas. National Academy Museum, Bequest of James A. Suydam

River style. Trees to either side of the composition form an asymmetrical frame through which we see a lake or river and a distant view of



Fig. 2. Robert S. Duncanson, *Landscape Mural*, about 1850–52, oil on plaster. Taft Museum of Art

mountains, suggested by the softer veils of color that mimic the effects of aerial perspective. The trees form dark patterned shapes against the sky, the source of light. Modeled by the hidden sun, the clouds take form from shades of yellow, pink, blue, and violet. Sharper detail and more densely applied paint in the lower edge of each painting help us read its foliage as near to us, enhancing the illusion that the rectangular opening is a window into another world. In both paintings, diminutive buildings in the distance create recession into the pictorial space, while zigzag patterns of landscape masses and shadows guide the eye deeply into it. Like Durand, Duncanson presents the sublime American wilderness, pure and full of possibilities, the expression of the new nation's social and moral ideals. The younger artist's landscape is more generalized because of his relative inexperience and decorative intentions, whereas Durand's descriptively packed image offers more particulars, suggesting close observation of real sites.

Duncanson and Luminism

What, if anything, is Luminist about this Duncanson mural? Luminism identifies the strong interest in light shared by a number of American landscapists during the 1850s and 1860s. Led by John F. Kensett and inspired by Durand, these artists emphasized powerful effects of light to communicate personal or contemplative experiences evoked by nature, which have sometimes been compared to the writings of the Transcendentalist philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.



Fig. 3. Robert S. Duncanson, *Landscape Mural*, about 1850–52, oil on plaster. Taft Museum of Art

In Duncanson's mural, the central placement of the golden radiating light—a typical Luminist strategy—invests the landscape with a mystical or poetic feeling. Living and working in Ohio, Duncanson did not participate in the artistic discussions at the heart of Luminist painting on the Eastern seaboard but shared some of the same concerns and approaches. Some of his later, mature works easily wear the adjective Luminist.

This sympathy is prefigured in another of Duncanson's landscape murals (fig. 3), especially by comparing it with another Luminist landscape from the exhibition, William Hart's *Twilight* (fig. 4). In Hart's landscape, which is dominated by light, the still-

ness of the pond or inlet captures the reflections of trees and the warmly colored sky, evoking a moment of repose or reflection. Small figures seated by the tree enact the viewer's absorption in the scene. Similarly, Duncanson's mural features a knot of four figures in the middle distance that provide a sense of scale and serve as our surrogates in the natural paradise. Hues of orange, violet, and rose describe the sunset sky, which casts ruddy reflections on the landscape below.

Duncanson's use of a Romantic convention, the dramatically contorted, storm-battered foreground tree trunks, puts his picture more properly in the context of Hudson River and English Romantic painting, where such trees commonly appear. However, Duncanson's rendering of the distant hills and the reddish reflections on the trees indicate that he was groping toward an expression of light's all-encompassing power. In sum, although it would not be accurate to call Duncanson a Luminist, we can find in his early murals a hint of the quintessential Luminist reverie: that state of quiet exaltation induced by an immersion in nature.



Fig. 4. William Hart, *Twilight (Landscape—Sunset on Long Island)*, undated, oil on canvas. National Academy Museum, Bequest of James A. Suydam