ROBERT S. DUNCANSON
by Edward H. Dwight

One hundred years ago, the career of Robert S. Duncanson as a painter was becoming established in Cincinnati, where he lived, and in Detroit, where he frequently visited. In 1851, at least ten prominent Cincinnatians owned his “fruit, fancy and historical paintings, and landscapes.” By then Cincinnati was the well-established center of culture in the West. “Prosperity and progress are everywhere evident,” a visiting artist from Baltimore wrote in his diary in 1851, “the long line of steam boats and piles of merchandise on the levee, the bustle of passing crowds, the whizz and whirr of factories, and the elegant stores, bank buildings and public halls give token of a brilliant future to the Queen City of the West.”

Recognition had come to Duncanson through the patronage of several wealthy citizens. Foremost, in patronage and wealth, was Nicholas Longworth, who “introduced art to the West.” He commissioned Duncanson to paint murals in the hallway of his attractive home, “Belmont,” known today as the Taft Museum. In the parlor stood a marble bust that bore the following inscription, “Dedicated by the author to his friend and patron N. Longworth, Esquire, Hiram Powers, Sculptor.” The fact that Powers was internationally famous, inspired Cincinnatians to patronize local artists. Because of this and because since 1812 there had been a succession of art schools in the city, many young artists came here and many became nationally prominent in the East later. These included Worthington Whittredge, Thomas Buchanan Read, Joseph Oriel Eaton, Miner K. Kellogg, Alexander Wyant and William L. Sonntag.

In 1851, a short distance from Longworth’s home, was the gallery of the Western Art Union where work by local and out-of-town artists was displayed the year round. “The Greek Slave,” Powers’ most famous statue, was exhibited there in 1851. Cincinnatians were proud of this salon, equal in size to the New York Art Union gallery and holding as many as 300 paintings at one time. The artist from Baltimore, after visiting this gallery, made the following astute observations in his 1851 diary:

“The artists of Cincinnati, and this city has been peculiarly prolific in men of this class, are mostly the uneducated votaries
"LANDSCAPE WITH MEN AND BOATS," Signed and Dated 1868.

— Collection of W. P. Barnes, Cincinnati.
of art, i.e. so far as academic instruction is concerned. The tendency of the school is good, self reliance and constant reference to nature, regardless, perhaps too much, of the great canons of art. The painters are mostly landscape artists and the beautiful country by which they are surrounded supplies them with ample material for study and subject. The most eminent in landscape is Sonntag . . . Whitridge [and] Duncanson (a Negro), also paint good landscapes.”

In 1851 Duncanson was 30 years old.

Robert S. Duncanson was born in New York State and was taken to Canada by his father, a Canadian of Scotch ancestry. His mother, a Negro, lived in Mt. Healthy, Ohio. In Canada, Duncanson received his primary education, and around 1841 he settled in Mt. Healthy, 15 miles north of Cincinnati. He remained in this small town until about 1857 when he moved to Cincinnati.

Cincinnati was a center of anti-slavery sentiment and activity. The voice of the Abolition movement in America was The Liberator, a journal founded by William Lloyd Garrison who demanded the immediate emancipation of the slaves. In an issue of 1846, under the dateline, “Cincinnati, July 29th,” the following article appeared:

“I had a great treat last evening in the view of some portraits and fancy pieces from the pencil of a Negro, who has had no instruction or knowledge of the art. He has been working as a . . . house painter, and employed his leisure time in these works of art, and they are really beautiful. . . . I saw these works in company with a lady from Nashville in whose family the wife of the artist was reared and brought up a slave.”

This artist could easily have been Duncanson, whose early works show little or no evidence of instruction and who by 1846 was painting fancy pieces and portraits. The first record of any activity by Duncanson is the listing of three paintings in a Cincinnati exhibition of 1842. Four years later he made his first trip, as an artist, to Detroit, where a local newspaper announced that he had painted the portraits of a number of citizens, “had designed and finished several historical and fancy pieces of great merit . . . A portrait of a young bride . . . is one of the most striking likenesses and tasteful pictures we have seen from the pencil of so young an artist.”
When the young artist returned to Detroit three years later, Henry N. Walker found him living in a state of absolute destitution and, becoming interested in his work, gave him $50.00.

In Cincinnati shortly afterward, Longworth came to his aid. Longworth had a reputation for providing work for those who wanted and needed it. He commissioned the Belmont murals (eight floor to ceiling paintings), with four overdoor decorations. While painting these murals, around 1850, Duncanson may have stayed at Belmont.

Longworth's generous patronage undoubtedly helped Duncanson. Partial proof can be found in the fact that about the time these murals were completed the Western Art Union distributed, through its annual lottery, eight of his landscapes. The year before only two Duncanson paintings were distributed and before that none. The titles of some of these landscapes indicate that he had travelled widely in the United States.

In 1853 Duncanson is listed as a daguerreotype artist at 28 West Fourth Street, the same address at which the enterprising James P. Ball, the Negro daguerreotypist, had his fashionable establishment from 1853 until 1857. Six of Duncanson's paintings were displayed in the reception room. Mr. Ball employed nine specialists to make his daguerreotypes and for a short time Duncanson was one of them.

The year 1853 was one of great activity and accomplishment for the 32 year old artist. The editor of the Detroit Tribune commissioned him to paint Uncle Tom and Little Eva from Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, published the year before. One of his paintings was exhibited in the New York World's Fair and in Detroit four were shown.

But the crowning event of 1853 was his trip to Italy with William L. Sonntag. In a letter written in Cincinnati on April 10, 1854, William Miller, a miniature painter, informed a friend that he had let Duncanson have another artist's room and that Duncanson had been executing some beautiful Italian compositions from sketches made abroad; "He gives extraordinary promise in these last pictures," he wrote, "and proves that he made good use of his eyes, in Italy, at least. His travelling companion, Sonntag, is still in New York." After this trip Sonntag remained in New York where he opened a studio. That he exerted a strong influence on Duncanson's work is beyond question. He was a
more knowing painter and had worked almost exclusively at landscape.

In the 1850's Duncanson travelled in the White Mountains, a favorite haunt of landscape artists at that time. The trip was financed by a Cincinnati manufacturer. His trip to Italy in 1853 was probably financed by the Anti-Slavery Society or by persons who favored abolition. In Duncanson's accomplishments as an artist, many leaders of the anti-slavery crusade saw proof that Negroes are not devoid of genius. Many of them bought his landscapes and several sat for portraits by him. One was Richard Sutton Rust, first president of Wilberforce College and a founder of Western Freedman's Aid Society. Duncanson painted a portrait of Nicholas Longworth, a member of the anti-slavery group, who financed a high school for Negroes in Cincinnati. In addition, Duncanson is supposed to have executed portraits of Charles Sumner, and James G. Birney, editor of an abolitionist paper in Cincinnati.

In 1855, while still a resident of Mt. Healthy, Duncanson painted a portrait of William Cary, a pioneer, who had settled in nearby College Hill and was an uncle of the verse writers, Alice and Phoebe Cary. College Hill was one of the stations of the Underground and runaways often took refuge in the homes of Negroes living in Mt. Healthy. No doubt Duncanson sheltered them in his home.

In 1858 Duncanson bought and sold a plot of land in Detroit, but he was primarily a Cincinnati resident. In the Cincinnati directory of this year he is listed as a landscape painter, the next year as a portrait painter and in 1861 Reuben Duncanson is listed as a clerk at the same business address as R. S. Duncanson. Reuben was probably a son. In April, 1861, the Civil War began and in the autumn of the next year, the following article appeared in the Cincinnati Weekly Gazette:

"Notwithstanding the unsettled state of the country, consequent on the civil war, we are pleased to notice that our artists are once more earnestly engaged in the pursuit of their inspired calling . . . The summer, which is usually a season when artists love to roam through the country — taking a sketch here, and painting a beautiful scene there, to be treasured up for some future work — has been peculiarly unfortunate for them this year."
MURAL-OIL ON PLASTER, Southwest Long Hall, Taft Museum, Cincinnati,
Robert S. Duncanson

The article reports on the activities of 16 artists, the second of whom is Duncanson, who was completing then a view of the Falls of Minnehaha and was beginning another of the same subject for a gentleman of Boston. Duncanson spent three weeks on the upper Mississippi River. In this same year, 1862, he executed a life size oil painting of a woman which has been given the inappropriate title, “Faith.” Various circumstances have led me to the conclusion that this is a portrait of Charlotte Saunders Cushman, the world-famous actress, in her best-known role as Lady Macbeth. Miss Cushman later helped Duncanson sell paintings in England. A view of Niagara Falls and another of Lancaster, Vermont, both painted in 1862, suggest that he visited Boston that summer.

Of all Duncanson’s paintings, however, none received more publicity and acclaim in his lifetime than “The Land of the Lotus Eaters,” inspired by Tennyson’s poem. He began this painting in Cincinnati in the year 1861, and when it was exhibited on completion six months later, it attracted wide attention. According to a newspaper account, the painting bore a strong resemblance to Church’s famous “Heart of the Andes,” that had been displayed in Cincinnati. Duncanson planned to take his painting to Canada in the summer of 1861, then ship it to London. But it was probably not until two years later that he went to Canada, where he retouched this canvas, made several other paintings and set sail for Scotland.

In Canada his color did not prevent his association with other artists and his entrance into good society, as it evidently had in Cincinnati. It may be that because of his light color he was not thought to be a Negro. In any event there was less prejudice in Canada and in Europe, then as now. He was greatly encouraged in Canada, and in Scotland and England was treated with consideration. His paintings brought high prices and he lived in style. His work was well received in Glasgow and other cities in Scotland. In England, through the efforts of Miss Cushman, he sold several paintings to the Duchess of Sutherland, a good friend of the Poet Laureate. Lord Tennyson received him at his home in recognition of his appreciation of his painting, “The Land of the Lotus Eaters.”

The year after the Civil War ended, Duncanson returned to Cincinnati where he exhibited six paintings of Scottish subjects and “The Lotus Eaters,” of which there might have been two
In 1868 a view of Spokane Falls was shown in the Queen City and in 1870 he painted the "Wilds of Arkansas," suggesting that once again the artist was traveling a great deal.

During part of 1870 and 1871 he must have returned to Scotland. There is no other way of explaining the large landscapes of Scottish scenery painted during these years. They are among his best work. In the summer of 1871 Duncanson informed a relative that a wealthy citizen had agreed to be his patron and had assured him of some income. He expected that his last years would glide smoothly along. He was receiving $500.00 for a medium sized canvas.

On his last trip to Detroit in the summer of '72, he was overtaken by a severe mental illness and was a patient in the Michigan State Retreat for three months. His wife informed his mother four days before his death that his condition had improved, he was no longer confined, but she had long before given up any hope of recovery.

Duncanson died on December 21, 1872, at the age of 52. Services were held in Detroit, and several Cincinnati newspapers carried a tribute drafted by the leading artists living then in that city.

Little is known about Duncanson's personality and personal life. From all accounts he was genial, of high ideals, modest and retiring. There are reports of his having been temperamental and given to moods of great depression, of violence in his insanity and the obsession near the end of his life that his brush was being guided by the hand of one of the masters. What is truth and what is exaggeration, we do not know. We do know that he wanted only to be accepted as a human being and an artist.

REFERENCES

1. Charles Cist, Cincinnati in 1851 (Cincinnati, 1851).
4. This bust is now in the collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum, as is Powers' bust of Longworth.
6. The 1860 census, taken June 8, lists Duncanson as aged 38, mulatto, artist, born in New York, his wife, Phoebe, 24, a mulatto, born in Kentucky, and a five month old boy, Milton J., born in Cincinnati.
Robert S. Duncanson

7. “Catalogue of the Second Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Statuary by the Section of Fine Arts of the Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge, 1842, Cincinnati.”
8. Detroit Advertiser, February 2, 1846.
9. Catalogues of the Western Art Union, Cincinnati, 1849, 1850.
10. “Ball’s Splendid Mammoth Pictorial Tour of the United States...” (Cincinnati, 1855).
12. Letter of April 10, 1854, from William Miller, Cincinnati, to Isaac Strohm, of Fairfield, Ohio, in the collection of HPSO.
15. “Catalogue of the First Annual Exhibition of the Associated Artists of Cincinnati, 1866-7.”
16. The Obituary of Robert S. Duncanson, published in a Detroit newspaper, is printed in full in James A. Porter’s “Robert S. Duncanson,” Art in America, October, 1951. For further references, see this article and another article by James A. Porter on Duncanson in Art in America, October, 1954.