

Pioneering black artist Robert S. Duncanson will finally get tombstone

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Ryan Patrick Hooper, Special to the Detroit Free Press



(Photo: Detroit Institute of Arts)

Robert S. Duncanson has been waiting for his tombstone for 146 years.

Duncanson is widely considered by art scholars to be the first African-American artist to gain international recognition for his paintings in the mid-19th Century — when many black Americans were still enslaved.

But even with his paintings held at major museums like the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, today he lies in Monroe's Historic Woodland Cemetery without a memorial of any kind.

Growing up the freeborn son of house painters and carpenters in Monroe, Duncanson would shed the title of artisan to become an established self-taught artist in Cincinnati, where abolitionist patrons helped exhibit his work overseas -- . unprecedented for a black artist in a time when slavery was an established way of life just beyond the Ohio River in Kentucky.



Artist Robert S. Duncanson was photographed by William Notman in Montreal, QC, in 1864. (Photo: William Notman, The McCord Museum)

Throughout his career, Duncanson split his time between the cultured social circles of Detroit and Cincinnati, where his career flourished.

Now a group of Detroit-area art patrons is looking to right the wrong that reduced a trailblazing black artist into an unknown buried in an unmarked grave.

Asserting a right through art

Duncanson's sweeping, large-scale landscapes of antebellum America's wilderness were in the same class as fellow Hudson River School landscape painters like Frederic Edwin Church and Thomas Cole, whom Duncanson looked up to.

In a century when Americans connected their national identity to the untamed wilderness of their young country, Duncanson painted picturesque landscapes inspired by romantic literature that seemed to assert his equal right as an African-American to the new nation's natural bounty.

In his 1994 book "The Emergence of the African-American Artist" — the standalone definitive biography of Duncanson's life and work — noted 19th-Century art authority Joseph D. Ketner points to Duncanson's depictions of Roman ruins in Italy as a warning that all slave-holding societies eventually meet a tragic end.

“The cultural leader of the free colored population in Cincinnati,” writes Ketner, “Duncanson revealed his own anti-slavery beliefs and substantiated his proclamation of sympathy with the plight of his fellow African-Americans as an ardent activist in abolitionist causes.”

Regardless of the messages mixed in with his paint, Duncanson ended his 30-year career hailed as the best landscape painter in the West by patrons and art critics alike — a designation even white artists of his era would have dreamed of.



Today, one of Duncanson’s greatest paintings, “Ellen’s Isle, Loch Katrine” (1871), is displayed in the same wing of the Detroit Institute of Arts featuring work by Church and Cole.

But for more than a century, his body has remained in Monroe, about 40 miles south of Detroit, with nothing but grass growing over his grave. Now, a small foundation marks the site of his burial awaiting the arrival of a tombstone.

“No one has asked about him — not in my lifetime,” said Michael Huggins, 55, the manager of the Historic Woodland Cemetery for the past two decades, and the person who helped find the exact location of Duncanson’s burial plot.

First opened in 1810, the 11-acre cemetery tucked away in the same town where Duncanson came of age is one of the oldest public cemeteries in the state, with over 7,000 people buried there. “Nobody was even looking” for Duncanson, said Huggins.

Righting a historical wrong

Duncanson is buried in his family plot.

A dozen of his family members are buried nearby — including his mother Lucy and father John Dean Duncanson, who moved the family from upstate New York to Monroe.

The Duncansons were likely one of the first African-American families to settle in the growing boomtown near Lake Erie in the 19th Century. The family trades were carpentry and house painting, which were passed on by Duncanson's grandfather Charles.

A former slave from Virginia, Charles Duncanson was the son of a slaveholder. He freed himself from bondage through skilled labor, eventually seeking shelter in the north from the racial and economic restraints of the south.

But even with steady work in growing Monroe, only two graves on the Duncanson family plot have headstones.

It's a cruel reminder of the fate that awaited many African-Americans when Duncanson died in 1872 — left to rest in obscurity.

Nearly a century and a half later, Monroe resident Dora Kelley is looking to rewrite a chapter of Duncanson's life. "Everybody has overlooked it for so many years," said Kelley, 57. Kelley is a self-taught painter herself who first came across Duncanson's work during a presentation at the Monroe County Historical Museum — she always loved the Hudson River School style that Duncanson painted in.

About three years ago, she began a grassroots effort among her friends to raise funds for a marker. It started in earnest with \$200 of her own money. "I found out that it would be way too hard to get donations out of the city, so we decided to go about it ourselves," said Kelley. "We got a small amount (from friends), but we needed help from the Breakfast Club."

The Detroit Fine Arts Breakfast Club is a weekly meeting where artists, gallery owners and enthusiasts alike gather at Noni's Sherwood Grille in northwest Detroit to show off and discuss original works of art.

Since first presenting her campaign, Kelley has become a regular at the club where her enthusiasm for the project has become infectious, said founder Henry Harper.

"Being a lifelong historian, I knew raising funds for a burial headstone for one of America's greatest artists was the right thing to do," said Harper. Detroit artist Henry Heading decided to auction off his own artwork to raise \$1,500 toward the project — far exceeding Kelley's original \$600 goal.

Kelley worked with LeClair Monuments in Lambertville to design a sleek black granite tombstone for Duncanson complete with his full name, the year of his death and an etched version of his "Ellen's Isle" painting from the DIA's collection. Kelley also chose a quote from the late artist to grace the monument, which speaks to Duncanson's unprecedented position as a freeborn artist in the era of slavery: "I have no color on the brain; all I have on the brain is paint."

The grave marker is scheduled to be unveiled at the Detroit Institute of Arts later this year, where several of Duncanson's paintings are on display. Following the ceremony, it'll be installed at the Historic Woodland Cemetery, where Kelley hopes it will become an attraction for art history enthusiasts.

The road to raising money and awareness for the Duncanson project wasn't easy for Kelley, who had to overcome a series of hardships herself.

Earlier this summer, her Monroe home was severely damaged in a fire. A few months later, Kelley was hospitalized in Toledo after contracting West Nile Virus via a mosquito, according to her husband Charles. At time of publication, she remained hospitalized in stable condition.

"Dora would want the Duncanson project to push forward without her — that goes without saying," said Charles Kelley via text. "Dora is proud that she recognized the deficiency of no headstone for this great artist."

Duncanson's difficult life

It's not surprising that securing a tombstone for Duncanson's grave would prove challenging.

There was little in Duncanson's life that wasn't.

Cincinnati was a hub for freed African-Americans escaping the Antebellum South, but just beyond the Ohio River, the slave trade was booming in Kentucky.

It was a constant reminder of Duncanson's ethereal status as a free citizen, causing what Ketner describes in his biography of the artist as a profound pressure that may have contributed to mental illness in the later years of his life.

Out of fear for his freedom, Duncanson fled to Canada for the duration of the Civil War. Returning to Cincinnati post-war, Duncanson found his network of white and black abolitionist patronage intact — a major factor in preserving the roughly 250 pieces of Duncanson's work that survive today, said Detroit Institute of Arts curator Valerie Mercer, who heads the museum's General Motors Center for African-American Art.

"The work of these early African-American artists are quickly disappearing," said Mercer. "The fact that a lot of contemporary African-American artists are getting a lot of attention increases interest, hopefully, in this history."

In recent years, interest in African-American art has grown in galleries and museums alike as they work to expand their collections. Some of Duncanson's larger landscapes have fetched upward of six figures at auction.

"Generally at these auctions, artists like Duncanson do well because people who are building collections on African-American art want to be able to tell as much of the history as they can afford to tell," said Mercer.

An increasing interest in African-American art, however, doesn't illuminate all the shadows surrounding Duncanson's life and career.

Duncanson's death was sudden, and was likely the result of working with lead-based paints for years — a common issue for artists of the 19th Century.



"Uncle Tom and Little Eva" by Robert S. Duncanson (Photo: Detroit Institute of Arts)

Returning home to Detroit to install an exhibition of his work in the autumn of 1872, the 51-year-old artist had a seizure likely caused by severe lead poisoning, according to Ketner's book. Post-collapse, he continued exhibiting symptoms associated with schizophrenia that defined the latter years of his career. At one point, Duncanson embraced spiritualism and believed he was embodied by a female master painter working through him.

"He had to be quite a strong and determined personality to develop his career," said Mercer. Duncanson's erratic behavior landed him in Michigan's first private mental institution, the Michigan State Retreat (now demolished; where Dearborn High School sits today). He likely shared space with Civil War veterans, alcoholics and others suffering from mental illness until his death in December of 1872.

With no death certificate issued, it's not clear how Duncanson died. He was buried in his family plot at Historic Woodland Cemetery after a funeral in Detroit.

"If you look at the records, it says it was a county burial," said cemetery manager Huggins. "The county doesn't pay for markers — now or ever."

"That was typical of the time in which he lived and died," added Mercer. "Because he was a black man, that would've happened."

His legacy still echoes in the Cincinnati art scene, where the Taft Museum of Art honors Duncanson with an artist-in-residence.

From musicians to playwrights and painters, the residency is designed to help propel forward the next generation of black artists — and continue to set the story straight on Duncanson himself.

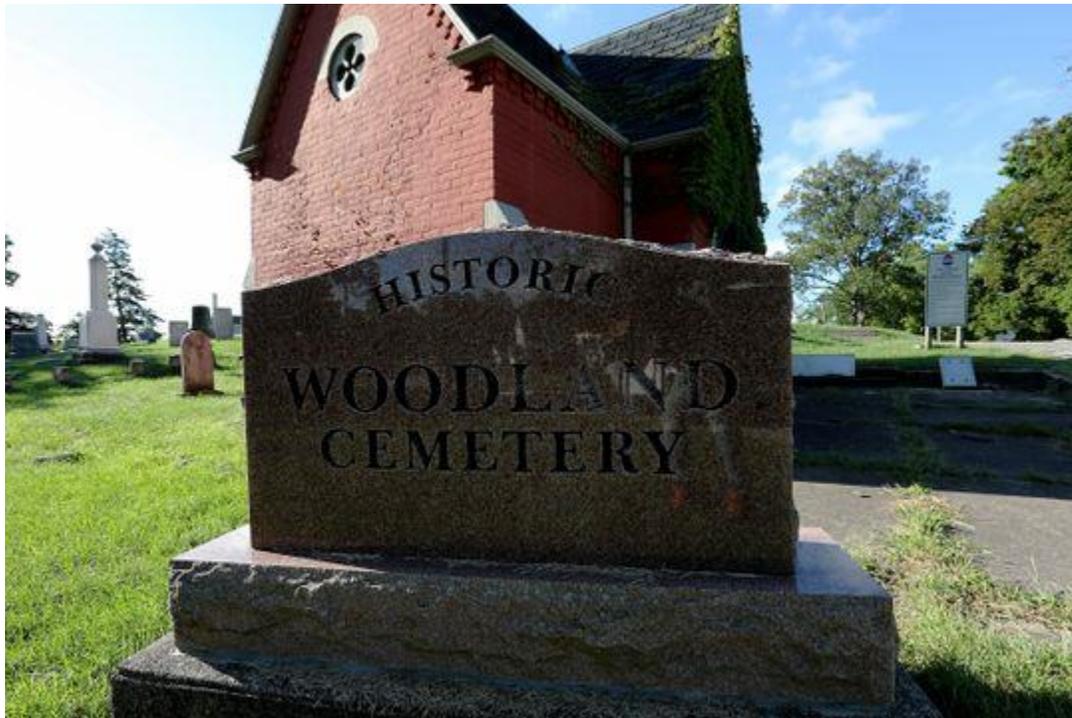
“His artistic expression, in a way, was a form of resistance,” said Taft Museum of Art associate curator Tamera Munte, who oversees the residency. “There are still similar struggles generations later.”

The struggle is especially pronounced in the classroom, argued Mercer.

“In most art history programs, African-American art is not really taught,” said Mercer. “A lot of the African-American artists are still left out. I hear that from the younger generation of burgeoning art historians — not enough women taught, not enough artists of color.”

Once the black granite marker is installed later this year, Kelley will have helped correct a similar historical oversight.

“If I can participate in helping right some of that wrong that we’ve done, it’s really cool,” said Kelley. “How many opportunities do we have to right a wrong like that? It really makes me feel good.”



Historic Woodland Cemetery is the home of the unmarked grave of American Landscape Painter Robert S. Duncanson, in Monroe, Mich.

Photographed on Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2018. (Photo: Kimberly P. Mitchell, Detroit Free Press)