Robert S. Duncanson, an African American Pioneer Artist with Links to Scotland

_Everlyn Nicodemus and Kristian Romare_¹

Robert S. Duncanson, a pioneer African-American artist of African and Scottish ancestry, was a revolutionary in being the first painter of African descent to enter the competitive world of fine art and to make an international career as a landscape painter combining the Romantic traditions of the Hudson River and Scottish Highlands schools of landscape painting. He met success in both U.S. and British circles but experienced traumatizing reverses and died mentally disordered and destitute. The authors of the chapter argue that his modification of the Romantic aesthetic of the Sublime, in paintings such as “The Land of the Lotus Eaters” and his depictions of Loch Katrine, suggest a political sensitivity to the fate of black slaves and Native Americans in the New World. After his death he fell into obscurity for nearly a century, and the archive situation is consequently highly faulty. Even the reliable art historical research from the beginning of the 1990s, upon which these papers primarily build, has left considerable lacunae. To bridge over these gaps in order to be able to tell an extraordinary life story and a unique artistic achievement has required assumptions and reasonable reconstructions, which will partly be discussed in the commentary at the end of this chapter.

I How an Early African American Pioneer Made his Career Through Scotland

The photograph reproduced here is taken in Montreal, Canada, in 1863. A man aged forty-two years poses as a relaxed gentleman, yet in his face there is a sensitive tension. It may indicate he is involved in an intellectual adventure. It might indicate more (Figure 1).

It is funny how photographers loved to choose props telling about the subject. The furniture in this portrait, made of trailing tree branches, might

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¹ Sections 1 and 2 of the chapter, by Everlyn Nicodemus and Kristian Romare respectively, build on common research, as the authors are working as a research team.
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Figure 1  W.A. Notman, Portrait of Robert S. Duncanson, Photograph 1864, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada.

indicate that the sitter is a landscape painter. And that is what he is. A beautiful water-colour from the same time has as its subject a wild forest.

The artist is Robert S. Duncanson (1821–72). He had come from Cincinnati, Ohio, and was on his way to Britain, in the hope of furthering his career. When he in due time arrived there, he ended up in Scotland, and his work bridges