

In Nature's Presence

ASHER B. DURAND AND AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

by Gail Leggio

Asher B. Durand (1796–1886) was a force in American art for much of the nineteenth century. His richly detailed woodland and mountain landscapes helped define the Hudson River School, and his plein-air *Studies from Nature*, which he exhibited alongside more finished paintings, are perennially fresh. Before he took up his signature genre, however, Durand had already made a career for himself as an engraver and a portrait painter. He was a public figure, serving as president of the National Academy of Design and collaborating with writers, patrons and other artists to forge the fledgling American cultural establishment. Yet he has not always received the attention he deserves, outside of some iconic pictures. He seems less charismatic than the prophetic founder of the Hudson River School, Thomas Cole (1800–48), less flamboyant than Frederic Church (1826–1900), who went beyond the familiar to confront the crisis of the Civil War and explore exotic locales in Technicolor panoramas. A progressive artist at mid-century, Durand did not change with the times; he sat out the era of Gilded Age cosmopolitanism, settling into the role of revered

elder statesman. Now he is in the spotlight, with three exhibitions in play: “Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape,” at the Brooklyn Museum (traveling to the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the San Diego Museum of Art); “The World of Asher B. Durand: The Artist in Antebellum New York,” at the



Asher B. Durand
*Study from Nature: Rocks and Trees
in the Catskills, New York, c. 1856*

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New-York Historical Society, and “Asher B. Durand (1796–1886), Dean of American Landscape,” at the National Academy Museum.

“Kindred Spirits” proves that Durand deserves the attention. Curated by Linda Ferber, Director of the Museum Division of the New-York Historical Society and former Chair of American Art at the Brooklyn Museum, the exhibition is the first major retrospective in thirty-five years. The sixty works on display, drawn from prominent collections, reveal a terrific artist and a first-class exemplar of American ingenuity. The title of the exhibition refers to Durand’s most famous painting but also alludes to the role relationships played in his career. As an engraver, Durand was an artisan; he became the premier designer of banknotes in the United States. He advanced his career when painter John Trumbull (1756–1843) chose him to engrave his *Declaration of Independence* (1823). Then Durand tackled John Vanderlyn’s (1775–1852) *Ariadne* (c. 1831–35), making an artistic, if not a commercial, success of one of the first American nudes. Durand gave up engraving and became a protégé of Luman Reed (1785–1836), an important collector of, among others, Cole. Reed encouraged Durand to take up portraiture, commissioning images of prominent Americans. The excellent exhibition catalogue illuminates the complexities of this milieu.¹

Durand became interested in landscape. In 1836 he accompanied Cole on a sketching tour and discovered his true passion. The artists of the Hudson River School saw their immediate slice of American scenery as the best expression of national identity, and of moral and spiritual worth, but the movement was hardly monolithic or static. Durand’s earliest landscapes show his admiration for Cole. Durand’s *The Morning of Life* and *The Evening of Life* (1840), a clear homage to Cole’s *The Departure* and *The Return* (1837), are luminous, rather academic landscapes. Durand’s pairing suggests the cycles of individual life and history, with children and a pagan temple, in the first, and an old man and a Christian church, in the second. The English-born Cole never completely abandoned history painting. Although his embrace of the sublime American wilderness was genuinely revolutionary, his last works were overtly allegorical—*The Course of Empire* and *The Voyage of Life*. By the time Cole died, on February 8, 1848, Durand had found his own personal style. When businessman and arts patron Jonathon Sturges commissioned a painting as a gift for the poet William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878), who had delivered Cole’s eulogy at the National Academy of Design, Durand was ready.

Durand’s *Kindred Spirits* (1849), one of the signature works of nineteenth-century American art, depicts Bryant and Cole looking out across Kaaterskill Clove, a dramatic gorge in the Catskills. It’s a tribute to a beloved mentor, but also a declaration that the torch has been passed. Nature is still the principal subject, but Durand is looking at it in a new way, closely observing tree bark, rock cliff and the water swirling though the debris of the streambed. Here, without losing the sense of reverence, Durand becomes the artist as realist and

amateur scientist. Geology was a passion among the Hudson River School painters, who carried rock hammers along with their sketchbooks, and *Kindred Spirits* is a portrait of the earth as well as of two men.² In the nineteenth century there were many well-publicized crises of faith precipitated by science, not only by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution but also by the work of geologists. Evidence that the Earth was far older than Biblical scholars had supposed was unsettling to some, but many embraced the new subject—as laid out, notably, in Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830–33)—with passionate interest. Goethe had commented on the geology and mineralogy of Italy, as well as the country's art and architecture, in his travel journals of 1786–88. John Ruskin was a member of the Royal Geological Society and the Mineralogical Society; he donated 2,000 of his own specimens to his Saint George's Museum, near Sheffield, England. Two aspects of this phenomenon are significant. First, science and religion were not considered necessarily incompatible. The American painters, like Ruskin, rejected "materialistic science." As Ruskin argued, "the real scientific man is the one who can embrace not only the laws that be, but who can feel to the full the beauty and truth of all that nature has to show, as the creator made them."³ Second, the commitment to the close observation of geological, botanical and meteorological detail entailed a shift toward realism, a way of honoring Nature as, in Patricia Ball's phrase, "an inexhaustible granary of facts."⁴ The plein-air sketch, in addition to its value as aesthetic practice, was a species of visual notation. As Jeremy Stick remarks in an important study of open-air painting, "the oil study could be regarded as a kind of specimen."⁵

The art produced by this kind of thinking can take many forms, with Ruskin's case being especially intriguing. An inveterate maker of studies of extraordinary aesthetic quality, he never went on to full-scale exhibition paintings. Yet his Dürer-like close-ups of clumps of grass and incisive visual analyses of rock and water—in, for example, *Gneiss Rock, Glenfinlas* (1853)—are testaments to natural beauty and artistic mastery. Durand has a similar clear-eyed reverence for the physical world, and his rocky landscapes—both exhibition pictures and studies—are compellingly honest. From the 1840s to the 1870s Durand made plein-air oil sketches called *Studies from Nature*. Usually unsigned and undated, these small-scale knockouts focus on trees, undergrowth, the exposed roots and soil of what Durand called "earthbanks," on boulders, ledges and rocky streambeds. The texture and structure of rock presents particular compositional challenges, which Durand tackles with a variety of strategies. The centerpiece of *Rocky Cliff* (c. 1860) is a monumental geologic shipwreck, and the artist captures the exquisite detail of its broken planes. A cursory landscape context is provided by trees and sky in the background. *Study from Nature, Bronxville, New York* (1856) depicts a scrappier mass of rock; a cluster of spindly trees is forcing its way through to the light, and vegetation encrusts the foreground. Durand casts his eyes downward for



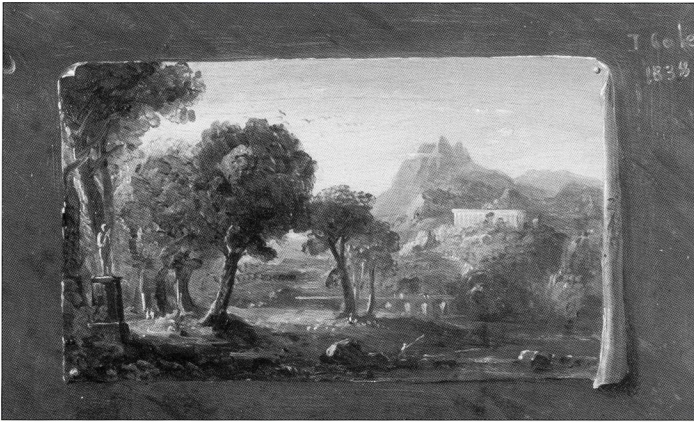
Asher B. Durand, *White Mountain Scenery, Franconia Notch, New Hampshire*, 1857

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Landscape: Creek and Rocks (1850s), a horizonless study of rippling water and sunlit stones, their contours softened by erosion.

Durand's tight-focus, penetrative gaze is symptomatic of wide-ranging changes in American art, affecting painting practice, exhibition strategies and even titling. While Durant used the word *composition* for many of his early landscapes, emphasizing the role of imagination in the transformation of raw data, later he increasingly labeled his works "studies." As exhibition curator Ferber remarks, there was a "sharpening of the debate in the late 1840s regarding the viability of the 'composition' as an appropriate format for the newly stringent definition of truth to nature."⁶ One of the more widely recognized signposts of nascent modernism is the re-evaluation of the preliminary sketch, raising it to the level of the finished painting as an autonomous work of art. Durand began displaying his studies publicly in 1843, and some critics voiced the opinion that they were as good as or superior to the more formal paintings.⁷ The Studies from Nature did not need to be rediscovered, although we undoubtedly see them somewhat differently than his contemporaries did, through the lens of modernism. Still, Durand was not a rebel against the establishment.

Like John Constable (1776–1837) in England, Durand gave local landscapes the full-scale dignity of history subjects. Constable was one of the few artists that really fired Durand's admiration during the American's European sojourn, from mid-1840 to mid-1841. Durand, who had dutifully made the



Thomas Cole
*Study for Dream of
 Arcadia*, 1838
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rounds of picture galleries and been disappointed by J.M.W. Turner, wrote in his journal about a picture by Constable “evincing more of simple health and naturalness than any English landscape I have before met with.”⁸ Durand was 43 years old when he made the tour, considered *de rigueur* in the education of an artist, and just embarking—after years in the lucrative fields of engraving and portraiture—on his career as a landscapist. His early efforts at exhibition, such as *Sunday Morning* (1839), had been faulted by the critics on the grounds of both taste and technique, justifiably, felt Durand, who was without solid formal training as a painter. Durand traveled, for part of the time, with younger colleagues John Casilear (1811–93) and John Kensett (1816–72), who seemed to enjoy Europe more. Yet, as Barbara Dayer Gallati demonstrates in her very detailed catalogue account, Durand benefited from what he called his “year of toilsome exile.” She ends her chapter with some undocumented but intriguing speculation on contemporary European artists whose work seemed to be headed in a similar direction as Durand’s, notably Achille-Etna Michallon (1796–1822) and the more famous Gustave Courbet (1819–77). As temperamentally different as they were, Courbet and Durand both had a passion for rock, *sous bois* and the woodland interior, and both were committed to realism. Courbet wrote in an 1861 open letter: “The beautiful exists in nature and may be encountered in the midst of reality under the most diverse aspects.... Artifice has no right to amplify this expression; by meddling with it, one only runs the risk of perverting and, consequently, of weakening it. The beauty provided by nature is superior to all the conventions of the artist.”⁹ A decade before Courbet’s letter, Durand was practicing his own brand of naturalism, through his increasingly assured and personal paintings and through his writings on art.

To trace Durand’s development as a painter, it is instructive to compare two large-scale (approximately four-by-five-foot), vertical-format works, painted a decade apart. Both feature monumental foreground trees and deftly trace the way light moves through a woodland interior, but there are striking

differences. In *The Beeches* (1845) the majestic cluster in the foreground functions almost as a Claudian coulisse, a proscenium for the sunlit vignette of a shepherd and his flock and, beyond that, a hazier view of water and distant hills. The trees lean backward, opening up more space for the sky. Durand has appropriated the Old World staffage of the pastoral for his American arcadia, and the backdrop has a generalized poetry; the middle-distance trees have a manicured look. But the treatment of the foreground is more realistic. The differing texture of the trees' bark is emphasized by the glancing sunlight, and richly observed groundcover proliferates at the twisted roots. Still, the artist orchestrates all these elements into a cohesive whole.

The 1855 *In the Woods* (cover) is a more enveloping picture. The trees lean inward, forming a compositionally strong yet uncontrived gateway to the interior, with a fallen trunk and a stream establishing the threshold. What we see through that frame is not a discrete picturesque vignette—as in *The Beeches*—but a continuation of the forest primeval, the foliage so dense that we glimpse only a few irregular patches of sky. Twisted roots and fallen trees already covered in new plant growth cover the shadowy, mulchy forest floor. It's a wonderful portrait of an ecosystem, with its cycles of decay and growth, and also a very spiritual painting. The rough Gothic arch of the trees promotes that sense of reverence, as does the light. Sunlight filters through in a zigzag path—striking high on the tree nearest us, lower on one just across the stream, diffusing to a soft glow on a stand further in—and leads the eye deep into the woodland sanctuary. In 1854 Durand showed a picture entitled *Primal Forest* (now known only from a large monochrome study), with some lines from Bryant's "A Forest Hymn" appended. The poem's central conceit is that "groves were God's first temples," and Bryant goes on to contrast the sacred architecture of nature with the less-powerful designs of human artists. The poet's focus is not on the sublimity of mountains and oceans but on "the stilly twilight" of the woodland interior. God is in "the cooler breath/That from the inmost darkness of the place/Comes, scarcely felt, the barksy trunks, the ground,/The fresh moist ground, are all instinct with thee."¹⁰ The poet captures a feeling here, and his analogy is a fruitful one, but at 120 lines, the poem goes on too long, and his moralizing seems dated. What Bryant, an important historical figure and a decent but not great poet, attempts to communicate, Durand gets absolutely right. *In the Woods* is both of its time and modern. Twentieth-century viewers like to congratulate themselves on spotting that breakthrough quality in a nineteenth-century artist not usually categorized as avant-garde. But Durand's contemporaries were astute. *In the Woods* represented "something new in landscape art," one critic wrote, something that "conforms to the modern spirit, based on reality."¹¹ During the same months that *In the Woods* was on display at the National Academy's annual exhibition, Durand's insightful "Letters on Landscape Painting" were appearing in *The Crayon*.

The Crayon was founded by Asher's son, John, and William James Stillman,

a Ruskin acolyte with close ties to the English Pre-Raphaelites, and became an important forum for the arts in the United States. Durand's "Letters," ostensibly addressed to students, also constituted a kind of serial manifesto, arguing for the spiritual, therapeutic and aesthetic value of the American landscape, real and painted. The catalogue includes an appendix with the full text of the "Letters." Warning against "the poisons of conventionalism," Durand brings an almost religious fervor to his theme of fidelity to nature: "Art is unworthy and vicious which is at variance with truth, and that only is worthy and elevated which impresses us with the feelings and emotions that we experience in the presence of the reality."¹² Not surprisingly, he suggests as a starting point depicting "a fragment of rock, or trunk of a tree,"¹³ but does not neglect atmospheric space: "an absolute nothing, yet of mighty influence...which...carries us into a picture, instead of allowing us to be detained in front of it."¹⁴ Durand does not limit himself to close-ups of nature, and there are a number of fine panoramic landscapes in the exhibition, including *The First Harvest in the Wilderness* (1855), commissioned directly from the artist by the Brooklyn Institute, forerunner of the Brooklyn Museum, to be the cornerstone of a public collection. The pioneer farmer represented, to Durand, the cultivation of the arts as well as the land. *White Mountain Scenery, Franconia Notch, New Hampshire* (1857) shows the distinctive V-shaped profile of the range through a haze of distance, with a placid river studded with signs of human habitation in the foreground. The more mysterious *Kaaterskill Clove* (1866)—a moody overview of a chasm that takes us to the rough-forested, rock-strewn edge—has an almost infinite sense of space that recalls Caspar David Friedrich. We find splendid examples of inspired grandstanding in the wilderness sublime of Cole, Church and Albert Bierstadt. Durand's more elemental approach is equally profound. Whether his subject is panoramic or intimate, he lets us know how deeply honored he feels to be in Nature's presence.

The Brooklyn exhibition is monographic, with loans from premier American institutions. The New-York Historical Society has gone into its permanent cache to mount the more contextual "The World of Asher B. Durand: The Artist in Antebellum New York." Durand, an honorary member by 1821, engraved the Society's membership diploma, and his paintings started entering the collection in 1857. The Society now holds around 400 works, including the marvelous *Study from Nature: Rocks and Trees* (c. 1856), among the fifty works on display at the Society, as well as one of the standouts in the Brooklyn exhibition, *Study from Nature: Rocks and Trees in the Catskills, New York* (c. 1856). These studies are fine examples of Durand's subtle mastery of color, with velvety yellow-green moss over steely gray rock, and rich browns and greens around serpentine roots. "The World of Asher B. Durand" features works by Durand's friends and colleagues: Samuel F.B. Morse's *Allegorical Landscape of New York University* (1835–36), John Kensett's *Seashore* (1861), landscapes by the lesser-known Thomas Hotchkiss and Christopher Cranch, and

examples of the genre pictures that were particularly popular in the decades before the Civil War. Luman Reed, that indefatigable collector, encouraged genre painters, as well as portraitists and landscapists. Featured here are William Sidney Mount's moral anecdote *Undutiful Boys* (*The Truant Gamblers*), from 1835, and Francis W. Edmonds's *The Image Pedlar* (c. 1844), with an itinerant artist showing a bust of Washington to a somewhat skeptical family. The most touching image in the show may be Thomas Cole's small *Study for Dream of Arcadia* (1838), a trompe l'oeil panel with an oil sketch "pinned" to the studio wall. It was a gift from Cole to Durand. The Society also owns an impressive group of portraits of New York luminaries, including Durand's *Self-Portrait* (c. 1835), a cameo profile from 1840, carved by Luigi Sanlini, a souvenir of his Italian tour, and portrait busts of *William Cullen Bryant* (1846) by Henry Kirke Brown and *Washington Irving* (1865) by Erastus Dow Palmer. A selection of memorabilia—including Durand's painting equipment, the lathe invented by his brother Cyrus for banknote engraving and photographs of Asher's Montclair studio—round out this examination of the antebellum arts scene.

The National Academy Museum is contributing to the celebration with "Asher B. Durand (1796–1886), Dean of American Landscape." This compact exhibition—twenty works drawn mostly from the institution's permanent collection—focuses on Durand's leadership as a founding member of the National Academy of Design in 1824, and its President from 1845 to 1861. The Academy played a pivotal role in the professionalization of artistic practice in antebellum America, and Durand was a principal architect and continuing advocate of the enterprise. The big draw among paintings here is the allegorical pair *The Morning of Life* and *The Evening of Life*, the culmination of the phase of Durand's career most obviously influenced by Cole. Engravings are in the spotlight, with Durand's versions of works by John Vanderlyn, *Ariadne* (c. 1835) and *General Andrew Jackson* (c. 1828), and Samuel F.B. Morse, *The Wife* (N.D.). The place of engravings in nineteenth-century America is undeniable, but the ramifications of the practice are complex. Engraving was a commercial business, and Durand believed he needed to sever his ties with it before truly assuming the role of fine artist. At the same time, engraving was an invaluable agent in both promulgating national iconography—as in the portraits of presidents and other leaders—and fostering art appreciation. Durand's paintings, in turn, would be engraved by others, and this exhibition includes Alfred Jones's version of *The Capture of Major Andre* (c. 1846) and James Smillie's version of the landscape *Dover Plains*. The ephemera at the Academy includes some interesting material, including official papers and Durand's *Anatomy Journals*.

"Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape" continues through July 29, 2007, at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, New York 11238. Telephone (718) 638-5000. On the Web at www.brooklynmuseum.org. The exhibition travels to the Smithsonian

American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. (September 14, 2007–January 6, 2008) and the San Diego Museum of Art (February 2–April 27, 2008). “The World of Asher B. Durand: The Artist in Antebellum New York” is on view through September 30, 2007, at the New-York Historical Society, 170 Central Park West, New York, New York 10024. Telephone (212) 485-9259. On the Web at www.nyhistory.org. “Asher B. Durand (1796–1886), Dean of American Landscape” will run from July 5 to December 30, 2007, at the National Academy Museum, 1083 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10128. Telephone (212) 369-4880. On the Web at www.nationalacademy.org

NOTES

1. *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape*, edited by Linda S. Ferber, with contributions by Ferber, Barbara Dayer Gallati, Kenneth T. Jackson, Sarah B. Snook (Brooklyn Museum with D. Giles Limited, London, 2007). In addition to the very informative text, the catalogue features a detailed chronology by Snook and beautiful, sensitive color reproductions (hardback, \$55.00; paperback, \$39.95).
2. Thomas Moran’s images of Yellowstone, instrumental in the creation of the National Park System, grow out of the painter’s excursions with official geological surveys. See Rebecca Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology and American Landscape Painting 1825–1875* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
3. *Ethics of the Dust*, cited in Anthony Lacy Gully, “Sermons in Stones: Ruskin and Geology,” *John Ruskin and the Victorian Eye* (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the Phoenix Art Museum, 1993), p. 165.
4. Patricia M. Ball, *The Science of Aspects: The Changing Role of Fact in the Work of Coleridge, Ruskin and Hopkins* (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1971), p. 73.
5. Jeremy Strick, “Nature Studied and Nature Remembered: The Oil Sketch in the Theory of Pierre-Henri de Valenciennes,” *In the Light of Italy*, contributions by Strick, Philip Conisbee, Sara Faunce (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 81.
6. Linda Ferber, “Asher B. Durand, Landscape Painter,” *Kindred Spirits*, p. 153.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
8. Barbara Dayer Gallati, “‘A Year of Toilsome Exile’: Asher B. Durand’s European Sojourn,” *Kindred Spirits*, p. 95.
9. Linda Nochlin, ed., *Realism and Tradition in Art 1848–1900: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 35.
10. *The Poems of William Cullen Bryant*, ed., Louis Untermeyer (New York: Heritage Press, 1947), pp. 72–75.
11. Cited, *Kindred Spirits*, p. 187.
12. “Letter I,” *Kindred Spirits*, p. 233.
13. “Letter III,” *Kindred Spirits*, p. 236.
14. “Letter V,” *Kindred Spirits*, p. 240.