

The Life and Times of Robert S. Duncanson

Educator Resource | Grades 3–6

Subject Areas: History, ELA, and Art

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of African American artists in the mid-1800s was shaped by a growing abolitionist movement and the gradual expansion of educational opportunities for free Black individuals. Robert S. Duncanson, Mary Edmonia Lewis, Edward Bannister, and Henry Ossawa Tanner belonged to this small but growing group of artists. Despite challenges of discrimination and racism, Duncanson was one of the first African American artists to receive critical acclaim in the United States and abroad.



Robert S. Duncanson, *Ellen's Isle, Loch Katrine*, 1871. Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of the Estate of Ralphemond D. Parker

LEARNING TARGET

Through classroom and museum experiences, students learn about the life and times of the famous African American landscape painter, Robert S. Duncanson. As part of an emerging group of skilled, free Black artists in the 1800s, Duncanson's life tells the story of a self-taught painter who, with the support of several abolitionist patrons, gained much-deserved attention and fame for his beautifully skilled and serene works.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Students will:

- Explore a variety of artworks by Robert S. Duncanson.
- Learn about Duncanson's early life and experiences as a Black artist in the 1800s, highlighting his connection to Michigan.
- Understand the role abolitionists played in supporting free African American artists.
- Write a letter to Duncanson that shows an understanding of the artist's life and experiences.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Teacher Resource A: Duncanson's Biography
- Robert S. Duncanson Presentation Slides
- Student Handout A: Museum Self-Guided Experience

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CCSS ALIGNMENT

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.1

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.2

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

21ST CENTURY LEARNING SKILLS ALIGNMENT

Communication

Creativity

Initiative

Productivity

Pre-Visit Activities

Look at a Duncanson Landscape | 15 minutes

1. Using the **Robert S. Duncanson Presentation Slides**, project slide 2 of *Ellen's Isle, Loch Katrine*. Give students a minute to silently look at the image.
2. Use Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to draw out observations from students.
 - a. What's going on in this image?
 - b. What do you see that makes you say that?
 - c. What more can we find?
3. Tell students, "*This painting is called Ellen's Isle, Loch Katrine, and it was painted in 1871 by a famous African American painter named Robert S. Duncanson. Over the next few days, we're going to learn about his life, his artworks, and his experiences as a painter.*"

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Learn About Duncanson's Life | 15 minutes

1. Slide 3: Introduce and explain each vocabulary term.
 - **Abolitionist:** a person who worked to end slavery.
 - **Emerging:** something just starting to come out or be seen.
 - **Landscape:** An artwork that shows a natural setting and landforms, such as lakes or mountains.
 - **Still Life:** An artwork of carefully placed non-living objects. Objects can be natural, such as a bowl of fruit or a vase of flowers, or human-made, like books.
2. Slides 4–9: Use **Teacher Resource A: Duncanson's Biography** to accompany the presentation slides. Give students information about the life and times of Duncanson.

Reflection Questions | 10 minutes

- What was something interesting or surprising you learned about Duncanson's life?
- Describe some of the challenges Duncanson faced throughout his career as an artist.
- Who were the abolitionists? What role did they play in Duncanson's story?
- What were some of Duncanson's major accomplishments throughout his career as an artist?

Make Something Inspired by Duncanson | 15 minutes

1. Ask students to sketch or draw something that they remember from the story about Robert S. Duncanson.
2. In the last five minutes, ask a few students what they chose from the story to create and why. For non-art students, focus more on the thought process and the making process, rather than the finished product.

During Visit Activities

Guided Tour Experience and Rationale | 45–60 minutes

To complement this lesson, consider booking the “Shaping Identity | Africana” guided gallery experience with one of the skilled Gallery Teachers. Designed for students in grades 3–12, this tour explores art from the African diaspora and uses a variety of open-ended questions while layering in information about the artworks and artists. [Click here to book a field trip today!](#)

Self-Guided Experience | 45–60 minutes

Print one **Student Handout A: Museum Self-Guided Experience** for each student. With their chaperone, students in groups of 10 can explore other artists in this gallery, as well as landscapes, still lifes, and portraits in a variety of galleries.

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Post-Visit Activities

Museum Visit Debrief | 10 minutes

Once back in the classroom, ask students to use DIA reflections to answer the following questions.

- Tell me about your visit! Which artwork did you find the most interesting and why?
- You saw several artworks by Robert S. Duncanson at the Detroit Institute of Arts. When you saw his artwork in person, which one did you enjoy most? Why?
- What questions or wonderings came up for you about Duncanson as you walked through the gallery?

A Letter to Robert S. Duncanson | 45 minutes

1. Explain to students that they will now use sketches and notes from their museum visit to write a letter to Duncanson to better understand his art and his life as an artist. Students should pretend they are getting to know Duncanson as if he were still alive today.
2. Tell students that their letter can include what they learned about Duncanson in class, which of his paintings they saw in the museum, and what they thought about them. Remind students that the best way to write a letter is to ask questions that begin with: *who, what, where, when, why, and how?*
3. Assign students to create five (5) detailed open-ended questions for their letter to Duncanson. Their letters should contain an introductory paragraph, two or three main body paragraphs that contain their observations and questions for Duncanson, and a conclusion paragraph.
4. Example of question topics: His childhood or education, his experiences as an artist, being an artist in the 1800s, his creative process, the artworks he painted, his time in Detroit, etc.
5. Have students proofread, edit, and revise their letters before sharing.

CREDITS

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Teacher Resource A: Duncanson Biography Notes

SLIDE 4: Robert S. Duncanson was a famous African American painter and **landscape** artist. He was born in 1821 in New York state as a free Black person during a time when slavery was still legal in the United States. Being born free allowed him to choose his profession (what he wanted to do for work). As a boy, the family moved to Monroe, Michigan. There, he worked in the house painting business. But Duncanson wanted to become an artist.

SLIDE 5: Duncanson soon moved to Cincinnati, Ohio to pursue his dream. Although Duncanson did not have access to formal art training, he taught himself how to paint by copying other artists' work. In the beginning of his career, he painted many different subjects, such as **still lifes** (artwork of carefully placed non-living, or inanimate, objects), portraits (artworks of people), and **landscapes**. *In this **still life**, what do you see?*

SLIDE 6: Duncanson became known for painting **landscapes** — beautiful scenes of nature such as mountains, rivers, and forests. People loved his work so much that he was invited to travel to Europe to study art, which was a big honor. While in places like Scotland, England, France, and Italy, he got to see famous paintings and learn even more from other **landscape** artists. His skills as a landscape painter were so admired that a diplomat from Sweden met Duncanson in London and bought the painting you see here, called *Land of the Lotus Eaters*, for the Swedish Royal Art Collection, where it still is today. *Imagine you were inside this painting. What might you hear, smell, and feel?*

SLIDE 7: Duncanson was commissioned (hired) to execute paintings by several **abolitionists** throughout his career. Leading up to the Civil War, Black and white **abolitionists** worked to end slavery in the United States. They did this by helping escaped enslaved people make their way to free states, promoting education, and publicly speaking out and writing against slavery. Many **abolitionists** treated African Americans as equals, supported their voices, and worked for a future of freedom and dignity.

SLIDE 8: Even though life was harder for Black people at that time, Duncanson followed his passion and became one of the most respected artists of his day. At the height of his career, Duncanson was called “the best landscape painter in the West” by a local newspaper. Today, he is remembered as one of the first great Black American painters. *Looking at this painting, called *Landscape with Rainbows*, how does it make you feel? What do you see that makes you feel that way?*

SLIDE 9: Duncanson died in October 1872, a few months after falling ill while installing an exhibition in Detroit. As was not unusual during the 1800s, because Duncanson was Black, his burial place had no marker or headstone. However, after fundraising done by Detroit-based artist Dora Kelley, in 2019, the Detroit Institute of Arts presented a headstone to mark Duncanson's grave in Monroe, Michigan.

Sources:

Greenberger, Alex. “Robert S. Duncanson Charted New Paths for Black Artists in 19th-Century America.” *ARTnews*. January 1, 2021. Who Was Robert S. Duncanson, and Why Was He Important?

Moore, Lucinda. “America's Forgotten Landscape Painter: Robert S. Duncanson.” *Smithsonian* magazine. October 18, 2011. America's Forgotten Landscape Painter: Robert S. Duncanson.