

# Lesson Plan: Robert S. Duncanson

## Tissue Paper Landscape

### Overview

Students will learn about an important artist who was born in Fayette, NY and why he is important.

### Objectives

After completing this activity students will:

- Know about the life and work of Robert S. Duncanson, an artist who was born in Fayette, NY.
- Know what a landscape artwork is.
- Use their observational skills to explore Robert S. Duncanson artwork.
- Create their own landscape artwork.

### Time Required

One class period

### Grade Range

1-3

### Materials

- Smartboard or projector to project images of paintings.
- *Landscape with Rainbow* by Robert S. Duncanson. High-resolution digital images are found on the Smithsonian American Art Museum website: <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/landscape-rainbow-7601>
- Additional Duncanson images can be found on the websites of institutions which hold his work, including the Smithsonian and the Cincinnati Museum of art ([https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/robert-s-duncanson/NQJyYinFqXw\\_Lw](https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/robert-s-duncanson/NQJyYinFqXw_Lw))
- Tissue paper (different colors)
- Bristol board, card stock, poster board, or other thick, heavy paper
- White glue (or Modge Podge)
- Water
- Paintbrushes
- Container for water

### Subject

Art History and Art Studio

### NYS Learning Standards

- VA:Re8.1.1
- VA:Cr2.3.1
- VA:Cr1.2.1

### Preparation

Review the background information and the images of Duncanson's work. Read through the procedures. Assemble your materials.

### Procedure

Explain to the students that they will be learning about an artist who was born in Fayette, NY who became famous in his time and is being rediscovered today. We will look at one of his landscape paintings, discuss it, and create a landscape of our own.

Robert S. Duncanson was a famous Hudson River School artist who was born in Fayette, NY two-hundred years ago. Seneca County is celebrating him for a year (June 1, 2021-May 31, 2022). One of his works was chosen by First Lady Jill Biden to be featured in her husband's inaugural ceremonies.

## **Background Information**

### **Who was Robert S. Duncanson?**

Robert S. Duncanson (1821 – December 21, 1872) was a 19th-century American landscape artist of European and African ancestry. Inspired by famous American landscape artists like Thomas Cole, Duncanson created renowned landscape paintings and is considered a second-generation Hudson River School artist. He is also considered the first African-American artist to be internationally known.

Duncanson was born in 1821 in Fayette, New York in the Finger Lakes. His father was a skilled carpenter and house painter. Duncanson learned these skills from his father as a young child, which helped him develop into an artist. When Duncanson was a boy, the family moved to Monroe, Michigan. He spent his teenage years there until he relocated to Cincinnati, Ohio and started his career as an artist.

### **What is the Hudson River School art movement?**

The Hudson River School was a mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century American art movement embodied by a group of landscape painters who created works that focused on the beauty and power of nature. . Their paintings typically depict the Hudson River Valley and the surrounding area, including the Catskill, Adirondack, and White Mountains.

### **What does Plein Air mean?**

Drawing outside is known as “Plein Air” drawing. Literally translated, this French term means “in the open air.” Drawing and painting outside is a common thing for artists to do today, but as writer Marion Boddy Evans explains, “...in the late 1800s when the Impressionists ventured out of their studios into nature to investigate and capture the effects of sunlight and different times of days on a subject, it was quite revolutionary.”

## **Discussion**

We can learn a lot about an artist by looking at their artwork closely. Let's look at *Landscape with Rainbow* to better understand Duncanson's artwork.

### **1. Begin by discussing with students what a landscape painting is and why an artist might paint one.**

Landscape painting is the portrayal of natural scenery such as mountains, valleys, trees, rivers, and forests. Usually they include sky and a wide view of an area with elements arranged in a composition, which may include buildings, people, animals, and weather. An artist can use a landscape to tell a story, convey a feeling, explore color and light, or represent a particular place. The scene can be real or imaginary or contain elements of both.

### **2. Spend time carefully looking at the painting. Discuss what they notice.**

Have students spend one minute silently looking at the painting. After the minute is up, ask what they think is going on in the painting. As they explain, ask them for details to support their opinions. Ask them what they see that makes them say that? Keep digging for more; ask what more can they find?

### **3. What do they feel when they look at this painting? How did Duncanson use shapes and colors to create a feeling about the scene? Why do they think Duncanson painted this scene?**

## **Art Activity: Tissue Paper Landscape**

### **Directions**

Tell students they are going to create a landscape inspired by the works of Robert S. Duncanson. Distribute tissue paper.

1. Students should tear pieces of tissue paper the width of the board and plan their landscape. Laid horizontally across their paper, the tissue will make up the different layers of the landscape from foreground to background. Students should test out how they want to layer the paper and determine what should go in front (foreground) or in the back (background, e.g. mountains). The background layers will be applied first and the foreground layers last.

Mix some water and a touch of glue—just enough to make the glue a bit runny (more glue=less water). Distribute paint brushes, poster board, and the glue/water mixture.

2. Brush a thin layer of the glue and water mixture over the poster board.
3. Lay one piece of tissue paper down at a time
4. Brush over each piece with glue and water
5. The dyes in the tissue paper will begin to run together—almost like watercolors!
6. Continue until the paper is full
7. Display finished work

### **Wrap up discussion**

How was the process of creating a landscape?

Did you create an imaginary landscape or a real place?