

Lesson Plan: Robert S. Duncanson

Plein Air Drawing Lesson Plan

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

Grades

4-8

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://americanart.si.edu/artist/robert-s-duncanson-1353>
- Paper for sketching
- Pencils
- Colored pencils or paints
- Drawing board, clipboard or thick piece of cardboard for each student to draw on.

Subject

Art History and Art Studio

NYS Learning Standards

- VA:Cn10.1.4
- VA:Re7.2.4

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 the inaugural ceremonies in 2021.

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 movement of art?

The Hudson River School was a group of American landscape painters who worked between about 1825 and 1870. Their aesthetic vision was influenced by Romanticism. The paintings typically depict the Hudson River Valley and the surrounding area, including the Catskill, Adirondack, and White Mountains. They formed the first school of painting in the U.S. Many tried to convey the uniqueness of the American landscape by creating idealized images of real places. They celebrated America and displayed their artistic independence from European tradition.

What does Plein Air mean?

Drawing outside is known as “Plein Air” drawing. Literally translated, this French term means “in the open air”. The Hudson River artists painted and sketched outside. Many of the artists did not have a camera so this was a way to capture the landscape. They would take their sketches back to the studio to use as layouts for the final painting.

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?

Art Activity: Plein Air Sketching

Artists use sketches as a quick way to capture ideas and to work out problems on the paper. A sketch is done quickly and roughly without concern for detail. An artist might make a sketch to capture the general mood of a scene or to help work out an idea for a finished composition. A sketch should only take a few minutes or even seconds.

Directions

Students will create a fast sketch in the same way many of the Hudson River School artists once drew. In 15 minutes they should make three or more quick sketches of the surrounding landscapes.

1. Go and find a nice place to sit, where you have a great view of some trees, shrubs or flowers.
2. Set up your outdoor workspace by sitting down, placing the cardboard on your knees, and laying the paper on top of that.
3. Look at what you are going to draw.
4. Really look closely to see all the details that make up a tree, shrub or flower.
5. Start drawing.
6. Don't worry about what your drawing looks like—this is your impression of what you see.
7. You might wish to lightly sketch a tree trunk and branches with pencil, and then fill in the leaves using colored pencils (or paint).
8. The sky truly is the limit and the only rule is to have fun!
9. Once you are finished with one picture, draw another, and another, and another!

Wrap up discussion

After 15 minutes, gather as a group and look at each other's sketches.

Are they similar? Different?

How was the process of sketching outside and quickly?