



Smithsonian
***Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture***

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Aug. 14, 2007

Media only: Laura Baptiste (202) 633-8494
Amy Hutchins (202) 633-8497
Media Web site: americanart.si.edu/press
Media preview: Monday, Sept. 10; 9:30 – 11:30 a.m.
Public only: (202) 633-1000

Smithsonian American Art Museum Hosts the First Major Retrospective in 35 Years Devoted to Celebrated American Landscape Painter Asher B. Durand

“Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape,” the first major retrospective in 35 years devoted to this celebrated leader of the Hudson River School, is on view from Sept. 14 through Jan. 6, 2008 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The exhibition presents 57 works, including some of the most beautiful and well-known American landscape paintings of the 19th century. Works from every aspect of Durand’s long career as a major engraver, portrait painter and landscape painter are on display. These include the iconic “Kindred Spirits” (1849) and “Progress (The Advance of Civilization)” (1853), as well as a generous selection of his plein-air painted sketches, often referred to as his “Studies from Nature.”

New research and new approaches to the study of art history prompted this fresh look at Durand’s contribution to American art. “Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape” was organized for the Brooklyn Museum by Linda Ferber, vice president and director of the museum division of the New-York Historical Society and former Andrew W. Mellon Curator and chair of American art at the Brooklyn Museum.

“I am pleased to present this comprehensive examination of one of the most important early landscape painters and teachers in 19th-century America to audiences in Washington,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Asher B. Durand (1796–1886), the acknowledged dean of the American landscape school from his election as president of the National Academy of Design in 1845 until his death at age 90, was a figure of central importance in American art. During these 40 years, Durand set the tone for American landscape painting, which celebrated man’s relationship to nature and the wilderness. He helped to define an American sensibility about the land, setting it apart from European traditions, and he

perfected innovative compositional elements, such as the vertical format for scenes. Durand's influence hastened the decline of history painting in the mid-19th century and the rise in popularity of landscape paintings, which were increasingly considered great works of art.

Durand was an early and influential proponent of sketching outdoors. In the late 1840s, the distinction between plein-air sketches for an artist's personal use and the larger-scale finished landscape paintings for public display collapsed. Durand, who was influenced by the British critic John Ruskin, advocated a naturalistic approach to landscape. This progressive attitude, which aligns Durand with other supporters of realism, lends a modern sensibility to his work.

"Durand captured the sublime grandeur of the American landscape at a time when national identity was tied to depictions of these regions," said Eleanor Jones Harvey, chief curator at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. "Both his vibrant painted sketches and his polished studio paintings embody the American search for self-knowledge and our restless exploration of the land."

The exhibition is organized in a chronological and thematic manner that reflects the stages of Durand's career, with emphasis given to the landscape paintings for which he is best known today. His multifaceted six-decade career spanned the period from the earliest efforts of artists and writers to create a national cultural identity through the mid-century triumph and subsequent eclipse of the Hudson River School.

Durand's most famous painting, "Kindred Spirits," is the centerpiece of the exhibition. It was commissioned by New York businessman and arts patron Jonathan Sturges as a gift for William Cullen Bryant, who had delivered a moving eulogy for Thomas Cole at the National Academy of Design in 1848. The painting depicts Bryant and Cole in the wilderness of the Catskill Mountains in New York and was intended as an homage to Cole and as a demonstration of Durand's position as leader of the landscape school. The botanical precision of the mountain forest and foreground trees marks a new direction toward realism in Durand's work.

Another highlight of the exhibition is the Smithsonian American Art Museum's "Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York" (1848), one of Durand's best-known pastoral images. An engraving based on the painting was distributed in 1850 to the members of the American Art-Union, a popular method for promoting fine arts. In this scene, Durand depicts the coexistence of man and nature in panoramic scene that was considered a radical compositional departure at the time. Although the peaceful scene appears to be effortlessly executed, Durand spent a year painstakingly sketching the hills in upstate New York so every detail, including the native trees and plants, was correct.

Other works on view include “Thomas Cole” (ca. 1837), a sensitive portrayal of Cole painted at the peak of Durand’s powers as a portraitist; “In the Woods” (1855), a landmark painting composed from oil studies made in the Shokan region of the Catskills that was intended to evoke the primeval North American forest and represents one of Durand’s most important contributions to the American landscape vocabulary; “White Mountain Scenery, Franconia Notch, New Hampshire” (1857), a classic panoramic view of the White Mountains that was commissioned by the prominent New York collector Robert L. Stuart; and a selection of his “Studies from Nature,” featuring vignettes of Durand’s favorite sketching sites.

About the Artist

Durand was born Aug. 21, 1796, in Maplewood (formerly Jefferson Village), N.J. From 1812 to 1820, he was an apprentice, then partner, to an engraver copying English book illustrations. His reputation as a printmaker was established in 1823, when he received wide acclaim for an engraving after John Trumbull’s famous painting “The Declaration of Independence.” This firmly established his reputation as the finest engraver in the United States. In the 1830s, Durand ended his engraving business and entered into a short, successful period as a portrait painter of U.S. presidents and other Americans of political and social prominence. In 1837, a sketching expedition to the Adirondacks with the artist Thomas Cole, a close friend and mentor, led to Durand’s decision to concentrate on landscape painting. Durand’s subsequent annual summer trips to the Catskill, Adirondack and White Mountains yielded hundreds of drawings and oil sketches that he later incorporated into finished paintings. From 1840 to 1841, he traveled extensively in Europe, studying the old masters and sketching from nature. Durand, who was one of the founders of the National Academy of Design in New York City, served as its second president from 1845 until 1861. In 1855, his influential “Letters on Landscape Painting” were published in the *Crayon*, an important art periodical founded by the artist’s son, John. Durand, who retired in 1869, stopped painting in 1878 and died Sept. 17, 1886, in his home town of Maplewood, N.J.

Public Programs

Several lectures are planned in conjunction with the exhibition. Linda Ferber, vice president and museum director of the New-York Historical Society, will present a talk titled “Who Was Asher B. Durand?” Saturday, Sept. 15. Terry Carbone, curator at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, will present “True to Nature: Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand in the 1840s” Saturday, Oct. 20; and Saturday, Nov. 3, the museum’s chief curator Eleanor Harvey discusses “Kindred Spirits: Asher Durand and Friends.” All three lectures begin at 3 p.m. in the museum’s McEvoy Auditorium. A family day is

scheduled for Saturday, Sept. 22 from 1 to 3 p.m., part of the museum's monthly SAAM I Am program. A full schedule of exciting events, from talks with artists to performances to behind-the-scenes tours, is available at americanart.si.edu.

Publications

A full-color catalog, co-published by the Brooklyn Museum and D Giles Limited, includes essays by Ferber; Barbara Dayer Gallati, curator emerita of American art at the Brooklyn Museum; and Kenneth T. Jackson, Jacques Barzun Professor of History and the Social Sciences at Columbia University. It is available for \$55 (\$39.95 softcover) in the museum store.

Credit

"Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape" has been organized by the Brooklyn Museum and was made possible by the Henry Luce Foundation. The Lunder Foundation, Oriana and Arnold McKinnon, and Clarice and Bob Smith support the presentation at the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Tour

After its presentation in Washington, the exhibition travels to the San Diego Museum of Art (Feb. 2, 2008 – April 27, 2008).

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum celebrates the vision and creativity of Americans with approximately 41,000 artworks in all media spanning more than three centuries. Its National Historic Landmark building, a dazzling showcase for American art and portraiture, is located at Eighth and F streets N.W. in the heart of a revitalized downtown arts district. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. Admission is free. Metrorail station: Gallery Place/Chinatown (Red, Yellow and Green lines). Smithsonian Information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Recorded museum information: (202) 633-7970. Web sites: americanart.si.edu and reynoldscenter.org.

###

Note to editors: Selected high-resolution images for publicity only may be downloaded from <ftp://saam-press@ftp.si.edu>. Call (202) 633-8530 for the password. Additional information about the exhibition is available from the museum's online press room at americanart.si.edu/press.