

Exhibition Wall Text

Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape Smithsonian American Art Museum Sept. 14, 2007–Jan. 6, 2008

Asher B. Durand (1796–1886), one of the most important American artists of the nineteenth century, was a central figure in the New York art world, and the acknowledged leader of the American landscape school from the mid-1840s until his death forty years later at the age of ninety. Durand's career spanned six decades, from the earliest efforts by American artists and writers to construct a national cultural identity using American scenery, through the mid-century triumph and subsequent eclipse of the Hudson River School of landscape painting. Although this native landscape school was overshadowed by new French-inspired styles after the Civil War, Durand was revered by later generations as an elder statesman of American art. Today his contributions are recognized as central to the development of nineteenth-century American landscape painting. He created some of the finest expressions of the American pastoral mode, he introduced the vertical forest interior as an expressive pictorial format, and he remains closely identified with the progressive practice of plein air (outdoor) painting.

Born on a farm in what is now Maplewood, New Jersey, Durand settled in Greenwich Village in New York as a young man in 1817. He distinguished himself first as a master banknote and reproductive engraver and then as a portrait painter. He also worked as a painter of rural genre (idealized images of everyday life) and literary narrative, finally yielding during the mid-1830s to his long-time desire to focus on landscape subjects. A year's sojourn in Europe (1840–1841) completed his artistic education; after his return home, he fully embraced the landscape practice for which he is best known today. Having served in 1826 as one of the founders of the National Academy of Design, the leading artists' organization of nineteenth-century America, Durand was elected president of that institution in 1845 and held the office until 1861. With the death of his rival and mentor Thomas Cole in 1848, Durand's stature rose even further as he inherited the role of America's most prominent landscape painter. In 1855 he articulated his views on plein air painting in his famous "Letters on Landscape Painting," which have proved a rich resource for artists of the time and for generations of critics and art historians. Durand retired to the family homestead in Maplewood in 1869 and continued to paint until the late 1870s. He is buried at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

DURAND'S PORTRAIT, GENRE, AND FIGURE PAINTINGS

Early in his career, Durand harbored the ambition to switch from the engraver's trade to the more creative and prestigious realm of the painter. His intense study of other artists' portrait, genre, and landscape paintings during the process of reproducing their works as engravings provided models that served him well. He made a careful copy in oil of *Ariadne*, John Vanderlyn's neoclassical nude of 1812, as he prepared to engrave that famous painting. By the early 1830s his abilities as both engraver and painter were widely recognized. Durand received commissions to paint portraits of prominent figures specifically so that he might also make engravings after his canvases. In 1835 Durand embarked on his most important portrait commission, a record of the nation's seven presidents. During the 1830s Durand also worked on a series of genre paintings, narrative works that sought to define a national culture by drawing inspiration from American writers and by portraying "American" social and ethnic types.

DURAND AS A LANDSCAPE PAINTER

The outdoor settings for some of Durand's portraits and genre subjects of the 1830s demonstrate his interest in landscape, which became his major focus after he returned from Europe in 1841. Durand's range and pictorial inventiveness as a landscape painter are striking. He moved easily among established landscape vocabularies, producing splendid wilderness images, historical landscapes, and grand allegories. The pastoral landscape was, perhaps, Durand's signature subject. These images of a cultivated terrain, populated with yeomen, domestic animals, neat houses, and white steeples, served as effective agents of an imagined national, political, and cultural unity in times of increasing sectional tension. The pastoral also served a private therapeutic purpose, since Durand believed that contemplating harmonious nature, actual or painted, could restore spiritual as well as physical health.

The artist was an early practitioner and a major advocate of outdoor painting in America, and he is still celebrated for his modestly scaled but powerful plein air paintings that record years of experience in the sketching grounds of the American landscape school. These works served as studies for the foreground vegetation and trees in his pastoral landscapes, as well as for a long series of vertical American forest interiors, a format that was virtually invented in the United States by Durand. Following traditional academic process, Durand used his drawn and painted plein air studies to create the final exhibition work, which was an elaborate invention, or “composition,” painted in the studio. The artist’s close study of natural objects and atmospheric effects informed the growing realism of his exhibition pictures in the 1850s.

DURAND’S STUDIES FROM NATURE

You need not a period of pupilage in an artist’s studio to learn to paint. . . . [L]et me earnestly recommend to you one STUDIO which you may freely enter, and receive in liberal measure the most sure and safe instruction ever meted to any pupil . . . –the STUDIO of Nature.

–“Letters on Landscape Painting,” Letter I, Crayon (January 3, 1855)

Durand’s decision to become a landscape painter not only offered professional promise but also answered a personal need to leave the studio for the great outdoors. From the 1840s to the 1870s, Durand spent several months annually on sketching expeditions that ranged from New York to New England, usually accompanied by fellow artists and family members. His lively letters from the field testify that these communal expeditions were as important to his physical and spiritual health as they were to his creative process.

Durand’s Studies from Nature, as they were collectively known, are the visual records of the artist’s keen observations about nature, light, and atmosphere. Although these field studies were primarily intended for studio use, they were also recognized by artists and critics in his day as having significant aesthetic value. While Durand was not unique in his plein air practice, the Studies from Nature have long been perceived as a special contribution within his oeuvre. Many of these paintings, generally small and unsigned, remained in the artist’s studio until his death. A number of them can be linked to the exhibition pictures in this installation.

Durand published his observations on painting from nature as his “Letters on Landscape Painting,” a series of nine essays that appeared in 1855 in the Crayon, a journal founded and co-edited by his son, John, a critic, and the landscape painter and critic William James Stillman. Offering practical advice for the aspiring landscape painter, the “Letters” expound on Durand’s own practice and beliefs, which were shared by many of his contemporaries.

MASTER ENGRAVER AND DRAFTSMAN

Durand taught himself the rudiments of engraving as a child while watching his father work as a watchmaker and silversmith. Apprenticed in 1812 to the Newark engraver Peter Maverick (1780–1831), Durand quickly mastered the craft, joining his firm in 1817 and managing its New York office. The two parted ways in 1820 after Durand accepted a commission from the prominent artist John Trumbull to engrave the image of his history painting The Declaration of Independence—a three-year project whose critical success launched the young engraver’s career.

Durand was the leading American practitioner of reproductive engraving for more than a decade. He was renowned for his ability to reduce and transform portrait, figure, and landscape paintings by other artists into compelling black-and-white images that were published as illustrations or circulated as prints. He and his brother Cyrus were also the foremost banknote engravers in the United States, setting new standards for the design and production of currency. Durand’s skills as a draftsman, honed by years of working as an engraver, provided the foundation for his fluent ability to record the landscape in hundreds of drawings and dozens of sketchbooks. From the 1840s through the 1870s, he spent several months each year on sketching and painting expeditions to locales in the Northeast.

Extended Wall Labels for Individual Works

After John Trumbull (American, 1756–1843)

Declaration of Independence

1823

line engraving

Durand's career as an engraver was launched in 1820 when John Trumbull commissioned him to engrave his renowned history painting, ***The Declaration of Independence***, one of the national subjects destined for the Rotunda of the U.S. Capitol. Durand worked on the large and complicated plate for the engraving for three years. The skills he demonstrated in making this large multi-figure image established his reputation as the finest engraver in the United States.

The New York Public Library Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

After John Vanderlyn (American, 1775–1852)

Andrew Jackson

1828

line engraving

This engraving of Andrew Jackson (1767–1845) was based on John Vanderlyn's imposing 1823 painting of the general that still hangs in New York's City Hall. The image shows Jackson as a bold military commander and hero of the 1814 Battle of New Orleans. By 1828, when this print was published, Jackson was about to run for president and so made an appealing candidate for a widely circulated print image. Much of Durand's business as an engraver was made up of such commissions to reproduce painted images of prominent public figures.

The New York Public Library Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints, and Photographs, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations

After John Vanderlyn (American, 1775–1852)

Ariadne

1835

line engraving

Durand engraved the plate for ***Ariadne*** in 1834, working from both John Vanderlyn's original 1812 oil painting, ***Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos*** (now at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts), which he purchased in 1831, and his own oil copy (displayed nearby). ***Ariadne*** was Durand's last major project as a printmaker, and with its skillful reproduction of the modeling and textures in the painting, it is considered to be his masterpiece as an engraver. According to the artist's biographer, ***Ariadne*** was undertaken as a demonstration of Durand's understanding of the neoclassical figure and not for commercial gain. The engraving, though a critical success, failed to sell because the public was not willing to accept the nude subject.

The Grolier Club, New York

Aaron Ogden

1833

oil on canvas

Determined to develop a painting career, Durand focused first on portraits—a logical step since he was already acclaimed for his accomplished reproductive engravings after the portrait paintings of other artists. His own painterly skills are well demonstrated in this confident portrayal of Aaron Ogden (1756–1839), a prominent New Jersey citizen. Ogden proudly wears his order of the Society of the Cincinnati, signifying illustrious military service in the American Revolution. Durand also engraved this portrait of Ogden for publication in a famous four-volume collection of biographies titled *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of several members of the Society, 1878.1

Andrew Jackson

1835

oil on canvas

As a successful portraitist during the 1830s, Durand painted many distinguished sitters. His most important patron, the New York merchant Luman Reed, boosted Durand's career greatly by commissioning portraits of all seven U.S. presidents. Durand traveled to Washington for sittings with Andrew Jackson (1767–1845) at the White House, reporting to Reed that the president “smokes, reads, and writes and attends to other business while I am painting, and the whole time of sitting is short of one hour. . . . The General has been . . . in a pretty good humour, but sometimes he gets his 'dander up.'”

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of the New-York Gallery of Fine Arts, 1858.11

The Pedlar (The Pedlar Displaying His Wares)

1836

oil on canvas

During the 1830s Durand also painted genre subjects in a manner similar to his fellow artists William Sidney Mount and Francis William Edmonds. Durand's version of a popular theme—an itinerant merchant showing his wares to a country family—demonstrates his skill in telling a story enacted by familiar social types. Their varied responses to the goods being shown take place in a carefully realized stage-like setting full of interesting details. Luman Reed, who commissioned this painting, was himself a successful New York merchant who had been raised in a small town upstate.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of the New-York Gallery of Fine Arts, 1858.26

Self-Portrait

circa 1835

oil on canvas

This image of the artist, handsome and self-possessed, shows an alert professional man in his later thirties well in command of his artistic powers. Whereas he depicted Thomas Cole outdoors gazing dreamily into the distance (see nearby portrait), Durand portrayed himself as a more sober figure in an interior space looking intently at the viewer (indicating his use of a mirror as he traced his own features).

National Academy Museum, New York, Gift of the artist, 384-P

Thomas Cole

circa 1837

oil on canvas

Durand's sensitive portrayal of his close friend, Thomas Cole (1801–1848), depicts that artist at the peak of his career. The two were regular correspondents, and in June 1837 the artists (and their wives) made a sketching expedition to Schroon Lake in the Adirondacks. This handsome painting, apparently a gift from the artist to Cole's wife, demonstrates Durand's portrait skills, which he used to pay homage to his mentor and role model by portraying him as a romantic figure against a turbulent sky.

Berkshire Museum, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Gift of Zenas Crane, 1917.13

Portrait of the Artist's Wife and Her Sister

1834

oil on canvas

Durand was left as a widower with three young children in 1830 upon the death of his first wife, Lucy Baldwin Durand. At the time of his remarriage in 1834, Durand celebrated the healing of this family loss with a double portrait of his new wife, Mary Frank Durand, shown in bridal white, in the company of her sister Jane. These two young women commune in a park-like setting of stately trees that not only suggests their romantic harmony with nature and each other but also indicates Durand's growing interest in landscape painting.

The Newark Museum, Bequest of Helen Thompson Durand, 1935, 35.32A, B

Sunday Morning

1839

oil on canvas

Combining both genre and landscape, ***Sunday Morning*** is an early statement of a theme that Durand would treat throughout his long career: a carefully painted rural setting in which village inhabitants enact traditional rituals of religious piety. A family procession leaves the homestead to progress down a country road, of the kind that forms the foreground of so many of Durand's landscapes, toward the village church in the middle distance. The resonance of the theme for Durand and his audience is demonstrated by the fact that this painting was published thirty years later as a popular engraving.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of the children of Asher B. Durand, 1903.3

Dance on the Battery in the Presence of Peter Stuyvesant

1838

oil on canvas

Durand set a number of literary narratives in landscapes, including this merry episode taken from Washington Irving's popular satire of 1809, ***History of New York . . . by Diedrich Knickerbocker***. Here Durand imagines the Battery of seventeenth-century New Amsterdam as the shaded promenade at the southern tip of Manhattan that it was in his own day. He interpreted Irving's humorous narrative as a playful multi-figure costume piece in which youthful dancers perform before the scandalized peg-legged governor of the colony. The painting was admired by contemporaries for Durand's success "in uniting a landscape and historical composition, without sacrificing either."

Museum of the City of New York, Gift of Jane Rutherford Faile through Kenneth C. Faile, 55.248

After John Vanderlyn (American, 1775–1852)

Ariadne

1831–35

oil on canvas

Although largely self-taught as a painter, Durand was well aware of the tradition of academic art training based on achieving mastery in depicting the human figure. In 1831 he purchased ***Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos*** from John Vanderlyn, who had created that celebrated academic nude years before (in 1812) in Paris. In preparation for engraving the painting, Durand painted this faithful copy in oils, reducing the picture to the size of the engraved image (displayed nearby). In copying the neoclassical masterwork, Durand also announced his determination to leave the business of engraving for the world of the painter.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Samuel P. Avery, 1897, 97.29.2

Study from Nature, Hoboken, New Jersey

circa 1837

oil on canvas

Durand painted outdoors whenever he could, often taking the ferry across the Hudson River to the Elysian Fields, a popular park-like resort in Hoboken, New Jersey.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of the children of Asher B. Durand, 1903.8

Landscape, Sunset

1838

oil on canvas

Thomas Cole's influence is evident in ***Landscape, Sunset***, a striking image of the Catskill Mountains, whose classic profile calls to mind Cole's already-famous views of the region. Durand's expansive twilight cloudscape, reaching far back toward the distant range on the horizon, combines bold color, accurate observation, and confident brushwork.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Lucy Maria Durand Woodman, 1907.10

The Solitary Oak (The Old Oak)

1844

oil on canvas

Durand's careful portrait of this massive oak tree, isolated against a glowing evening sky and giving shelter to domestic beasts, reflects his study of Old Master paintings during his travel in Europe from 1840 to 1841. Although both tree and cattle indicate Durand's deft assimilation of Anglo-Dutch models, this is a North American landscape with a neat wooden house, not a peasant's cottage, tucked into the right middle distance.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of the New-York Gallery of Fine Arts, 1858.75

The Stranded Ship

1844

oil on canvas

The Stranded Ship is nearly unique in Durand's oeuvre. This fluent exercise in Romantic marine painting surely played a role in Durand's ambitious program to demonstrate a new range of subjects upon his return from study abroad in 1841. Shipwreck was a resonant theme in Durand's day, and the lines of melancholy poetry that accompanied the work when it was exhibited make it clear that the image not only depicted a dreaded (and common) maritime disaster but also operated as a meditation on human tragedy.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of Ann and Mark Kington/The Kington Foundation through Millennium Funds, 2003.71.1

The Indian's Vespers

1847

oil on canvas

This imaginary landscape is based loosely on lines from the English poet Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* (1733). The presence of an Indian saluting the setting sun served to locate the scene in a mythical North American past. The sunset was also calculated to trigger a nostalgic meditation on the price of progress during a period of national expansion when Native Americans were rapidly being displaced and pushed westward.

The White House Collection, Washington, D.C.

An Old Man's Reminiscences

1845

oil on canvas

Durand addressed the theme of the human life cycle in this large and ambitious painting, presenting the stages of life as a sequence of episodes in a domesticated American landscape. These vignettes can be interpreted as representing simultaneous activities of young and old or as a visualization of the memories of the aged observer. Durand's vision of a bucolic community also evoked popular nostalgia for an imagined national past.

Albany Institute of History & Art, Gift of the Albany Gallery of Fine Arts, 1900.5.3

The Beeches

1845

oil on canvas

The Beeches inaugurated the long series of stately vertical tree and forest paintings for which Durand is famous. Here he transmuted an image of daily life in the country into a heroic American pastoral, conferring importance on the subject by means of large scale and emphasizing the trees by using a vertical format. The artist also signaled poetic content by drenching the view in a mellow golden light, inventing an American arcadia complete with shepherd, flock, and distant white steeple rising above the treetops, a symbol of the ideal agrarian community.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Maria DeWitt Jesup, from the collection of her husband, Morris K. Jesup, 1914, 15.30.59

Landscape with Beech Tree

circa 1845
oil on canvas

This early study records the trees inhabiting the foreground of *The Beeches*.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Nora Durand Woodman, 1932.16

Hudson River Looking Toward the Catskills

1847
oil on canvas

This work is a complete statement of Durand's American pastoral mode at its grandest and finest. The genre was modeled on the Arcadian subjects of seventeenth-century European landscape painters—park-like idyllic landscapes inhabited by domestic animals and humans engaged in rural labors or, as here, in recreation. Although the terrain is largely imaginary, it incorporates a modicum of topographical information with a deep panoramic view that may depict the Hudson River in the vicinity of Rhinecliff.

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York

Landscape, Composition, Forenoon

1847
oil on canvas

New Orleans Museum of Art, Gift of the Fine Arts Club of New Orleans, 16.4

Landscape, Composition, Afternoon, In the Woods

1847
oil on canvas

Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts, Museum Purchase, 1947.40

This splendid pair of grand pastoral landscapes representing different times of the day and rural labors was commissioned by James Robb, a wealthy banker and railroad speculator from New Orleans who had admired *The Beeches*. Durand modeled these pendant paintings on that work, also incorporating direct outdoor studies and undoubtedly referring, in the contrasting times of the day, to the serial landscapes of Thomas Cole. The paintings were separated in 1859 by the forced sale of Robb's collection and are reunited here for the first time since then.

Study: Trees by the Brookside, Kingston, New York

circa 1846
oil on canvas

Durand used this study as the model for the trees in the foreground of his large studio creation, *Landscape, Composition, Forenoon*, hanging nearby.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Purchase, The Louis Durr Fund, 1887.6

Landscape—Composition: In the Catskills

1848

oil on canvas

This work combines a distant view of the Catskill Mountains with a composed elevated foreground and framing trees. These elements, with the further addition of figural anecdote in the foreground, were all worked out in a detailed charcoal study before Durand began to paint. While the topography of this landscape is undoubtedly based generally on that of the Catskill region so well known to Durand and his fellow landscape painters, the title designation as a “composition” indicates that the picture as a whole is an imaginary construct.

San Diego Museum of Art, Museum purchase with funds provided by the Gerald and Inez Grant Parker Foundation, 1974:72

Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York

1848

oil on canvas

In *Dover Plains*, Durand integrated the foreground and figures effectively within an expansive aerial view, known as a panorama, which was based on actual topography and climate. Critics praised the “exceeding truth” of the landscape. Cleared and wooded zones alternate to indicate the harmonious balance of a settled and domesticated landscape. This painting gained widespread fame because it was engraved and distributed in 1850 to the large membership of the American Art-Union, a subscription society that commissioned such prints and held annual lotteries for works of art.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Thomas M. Evans and museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1978.126

Mountain Stream

circa 1848

oil on canvas

Durand’s landscapes included painted dramatic wilderness scenes like this one, in which he interpreted the famous Kaaterskill Clove, a long and deep gorge near the Catskill Mountain House much frequented by artists and tourists. In such works of the late 1840s, Durand created exhibition pictures that demonstrated a newly insistent observation of geological and botanical detail gleaned from his regular study outdoors.

Private collection

Kindred Spirits

1849

oil on canvas

Kindred Spirits was commissioned by the merchant collector Jonathan Sturges as a gift for William Cullen Bryant in gratitude for the nature poet’s moving eulogy to Thomas Cole, who had died suddenly in early 1848. Durand marshaled his skills as draftsman, genre painter, portraitist, and landscape painter to create a remarkable image. He memorialized Cole, who had been his own mentor, forever standing in a deep Catskill gorge, sketch portfolio in one hand and his recorder in the other, in company with their mutual friend Bryant.

The botanical precision of the mountain forest and foreground trees marks the new direction toward realism in Durand’s work. The gorge and the torrent embody geological process as well as sublime grandeur. The two figures might as easily be discussing their mutual fascination with the science of geology as meditating on the romantic sonnet by John Keats for which the painting is named.

Crystal Bridges—Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas

Progress (The Advance of Civilization)

1853

oil on canvas

Commissioned by Charles Gould, a broker and railroad investor, Durand's landscape is an allegory of Manifest Destiny, the belief in westward expansion that was central to the political and popular culture of the day. Economic advance and political stability are represented by farms, villages, canal, steamboat, railroad, and telegraph poles, all tucked into an imaginary landscape that evokes the Catskills and the Hudson River. Below the rising sun, on the horizon, lies a shining empire city. At the far edge of the less-settled foreground, a party of Indians confronts the future from a wilderness perch.

Warner Collection of Gulf States Paper Corporation, on view in The Westervelt Warner Museum of American Art, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

The First Harvest in the Wilderness

1855

oil on canvas

The First Harvest in the Wilderness, a cornerstone of the Brooklyn Museum's collection of American art, was one of the first two works funded by the historic bequest of the founder Augustus Graham (1775–1851). The painting commemorates Graham's gift, through which the Brooklyn Institute (forerunner of the Brooklyn Museum) established an innovative program to commission works from living artists to build a permanent collection. The artist invented a powerful landscape allegory of the collection's beginnings as a harvest in a mountainous wilderness. Graham's name appears as if carved on a boulder resting in the foreground, memorializing the individual, while his cultural legacy is symbolized by the pioneer farmer laboring in a sunny clearing.

Brooklyn Museum, Transferred from the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences to the Brooklyn Museum, 97.12

June Shower

1854

oil on canvas

Durand's growing commitment to realism in exhibition works as well as studies was demonstrated in 1854, when he completed this painting and ***Clearing Up*** (displayed nearby). These paintings were immediately recognized as representing a breakthrough for the artist in the introduction of highly convincing atmospheric and meteorological effects in his exhibition pictures.

Manoogian Collection

Clearing Up

1854

oil on canvas

The progression of a storm is vividly portrayed in both this work and ***June Shower*** (displayed nearby), demonstrating Durand's skills in recording the weather as an observable phenomenon of climatic experience.

Collection of Barrie and Deedee Wigmore, New York

View of Shandaken Mountains

1853

oil on canvas

This vigorous study of a storm brewing in the Shandaken range of the Catskills is related to both ***June Showers*** and ***Clearing Up*** (both displayed nearby).

Collection of Henry and Sharon Martin

Primeval Forest

circa 1854

sepia oil on canvas

This full-scale monochromatic oil study, the final step in creating the composition of an as-yet unlocated exhibition painting, celebrates the shadowy solitude of the deep woods. Lines from Bryant's poem "A Forest Hymn" were appended to ***Primeval Forest*** when it was exhibited in 1854.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Lucy Maria Durand Woodman, 1907.18

In the Woods

1855

oil on canvas

In the Woods is a grand-scale studio creation that was carefully composed to look as if it were an informal glimpse into the dense undergrowth of an old American forest. This work arguably marked the apex of Durand's landscape achievement. Critics hailed the painting as "something new" in landscape because Durand balanced the "exquisite drawing" of the trees with a sense of "the abounding space and atmosphere."

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift in memory of Jonathan Sturges, by his children, 1895, 95.13.1

Study: Woodland Interior

circa 1854

oil on canvas

This painting served as a study for the composition of ***In the Woods***.

Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Massachusetts, 1952.107

Sketch in the Woods (Landscape, Wood Scene)

1856

oil on canvas

Although dated 1856, this careful study of the lower trunks and gnarled roots of a birch tree surely provided the reference for the mossy trees seen at the left foreground of Durand's masterpiece of 1855, ***In the Woods***. The later date might record the occasion when this study was sold or given to Samuel Welsh (who owned the painting when it was exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1856) rather than the year (probably 1854) when Durand actually painted it.

Brandywine River Museum, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, Gift of Amanda K. Berls, 1980, 80.3.11

White Mountain Scenery, Franconia Notch, New Hampshire

1857

oil on canvas

This panoramic vista of the valley of the Pemigewasset River in the White Mountains of New Hampshire is a skillful summary image of a popular summer sketching ground and touring destination. Durand created a deep space that accurately synthesizes the topographical and atmospheric features of the region into a composite vision gleaned over several seasons in residence.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, The Robert L. Stuart Collection, Stuart-105

The Catskills

1859

oil on canvas

Durand sketched in both the Kaaterskill and the Plaaterskill cloves and here conflated the two Catskill gorges into a monumental vertical image framed by mighty tree trunks and a canopy of leaves. Beyond this foreground, the eye plunges, like the waterfall, into the distance to the faraway river plain of the Hudson. Durand originally called this landscape a reminiscence, suggesting a look back to the lost pristine quality of what was by then long-hallowed ground for the native school and a heavily visited tourist site.

The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 37.122

A Sycamore Tree, Plaaterkill Clove (The Sycamore, Kaaterskill Clove)

circa 1858

oil on canvas

This meticulously detailed record of the trunk of a mossy sycamore provided the model for the tree in the right foreground of *The Catskills*.

Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Mrs. Frederick F. Durand, 1929.152

Kaaterskill Clove

1866

oil on canvas

By 1860, although he was a respected elder statesman among artists, Durand was increasingly marginalized by the critics. Nevertheless, he did not retire from painting until the late 1870s. Working in the Catskills during the summers of 1864 and 1865, he assembled the sketches and studies for this commission from the Century Association. The seventy-year-old artist demonstrated not only his mastery of atmospheric perspective but also the capacity to invent a fresh interpretation for his last important painting of the region.

The Century Association, New York, 1866.6

Study from Nature: Trees, Newburgh, New York

1849

oil on canvas

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Nora Durand Woodman, 1932.49

Study from Nature, Stratton Notch, Vermont

1853

oil on canvas

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Lucy Maria Durand Woodman, 1907.21

Having become familiar with the light and dark of foreground objects, and their distinctness, fullness of detail, and freshness of color, place yourself so as to include a view of these with a gradually retiring distance. You will perceive that similar objects to those nearest you, at a few hundred yards distant, have undergone considerable change, and that change becoming more and more apparent with every step beyond. An examination into these changes affords us the first lesson in atmospheric space.

–“Letters on Landscape Painting,” Letter V, **Crayon** (March 7, 1855)

Shandaken, Ulster County, New York

1854

oil on canvas

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Nora Durand Woodman, 1932.17

Landscape with Birches

circa 1855

oil on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Mary Fuller Wilson, 63.268

Landscape (Birches and Oaks)

circa 1855–57

oil on canvas

Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Charles A. Schieren, 15.326

Study from Nature, Bronxville, New York

1856

oil on canvas

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Nora Durand Woodman, 1932.34

Study from Nature: Rocks and Trees in the Catskills, New York

circa 1856

oil on canvas

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Lucy Maria Durand Woodman, 1907.20

I have already advised you to aim at direct imitation, as far as possible, in your studies of foreground objects. You will be most successful in the more simple and solid materials, such as rocks and tree trunks, and after these, earth banks and the coarser kinds of grass, with mingling roots and plants, the larger leaves of which can be expressed with even botanical truthfulness; and they should be so rendered, but when you attempt masses of foliage or running water, anything like an equal degree of imitation becomes impracticable.

–“Letters on Landscape Painting,” Letter V, **Crayon** (March 7, 1855)

Rocky Cliff

circa 1860

oil on canvas

Proceed then, choosing the more simple foreground objects—a fragment of rock, or trunk of a tree; choose them when distinctly marked by strong light and shade, and thereby more readily comprehended; do not first attempt foliage or banks of mingled earth and grass; they are more difficult of imitation, which, as far as practicable, should be your purpose. Paint and repaint until you are sure the work represents the model—not that it merely resembles it.

–“Letters on Landscape Painting,” Letter III, **Crayon** (January 31, 1855)

Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, 1977.2.6

Landscape: Creek and Rocks

1850s

oil on canvas

Similar difficulties [in representation] occur in painting near water. We see its surface: through that, the bottom, when shallow, and at the same time surrounding objects and the sky above, all distinctly imaged upon this surface; all attempt at imitation must fall far short, and yet water may be as unmistakably represented as trees

–“Letters on Landscape Painting,” Letter V, *Crayon* (March 7, 1855)

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Gift of Charles Henry Hart, 1915.9

Study of a Rock

undated

oil on canvas

This purpose, that is, the study of foreground objects, is worthy whole years of labor; the process will improve your judgment, and develop your skill—and perception, thought, and ingenuity will be in constant exercise. . . . [Y]ou will have acquired knowledge and skill applicable alike to every portion of the picture.

–“Letters on Landscape Painting,” Letter III, *Crayon* (January 31, 1855)

Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Mrs. Frederick F. Durand, 1929.154

Schroon Lake Looking South

June 17, 1837

From the disassembled *Schroon Lake Sketchbook*

graphite on paper

In June 1837 Asher and Mary Durand, in company with Thomas and Maria Cole, made an expedition to Schroon Lake in the Adirondack Mountains. Cole directed Durand to purchase a camp stool, an umbrella, and a portable easel, suggesting that they planned to paint en plein air as well as draw. Cole later noted: “To Mr. Durand the scenery was entirely new and I am happy in having been the means of introducing the rich & varied scenes of Schroon to a true lover of Nature.” The trip inspired Durand’s long debated decision to leave portraiture for a career as a landscape painter.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Nora Durand Woodman, 1918.88

Notch House, White Mountains, New Hampshire

July 3, 1839

graphite on paper

In summer 1839 Durand and Cole sketched together in New Hampshire. Both made careful drawings in the deep White Mountain pass known as the Notch—a site famously associated with the memory of a massive landslide in 1826 that had destroyed a pioneer family named Willey. In Durand and Cole’s day, a hotel nearby called the Notch House accommodated tourists (and artists) who came to see the infamous landmark.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Nora Durand Woodman, 1918.95

Dover Plains, New York

circa 1847–48

graphite on paper

This straightforward record of the broad valley and profile of the mountain range served as a study for the middle ground and distance of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's painting, ***Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York***, hanging nearby.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Nora Durand Woodman, 1918.85

Study of Trees and Rocks, Kaaterskill Clove, New York

October 7, 1850

graphite on gray-green paper

The Kaaterskill Clove, a deep gorge in the Catskill Mountains running from the villages of Hunter, at the upper end, to Palenville at the lower, was a favorite sketching ground for the Hudson River School. In 1848 Durand reported to his son that no fewer than nine fellow artists were at work there.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Nora Durand Woodman, 1918.62

Island with Small Trees, Lake George, New York

circa 1862

graphite on paper

Durand sketched and painted in Hague, New York, on the northern end of Lake George, in summer 1862. At Lake George and in the Adirondacks, Durand's primary summer haunts in the 1860s and 1870s, he made some of his finest drawings and painted vigorous studies.

The New-York Historical Society Museum, Gift of Nora Durand Woodman, 1918.166