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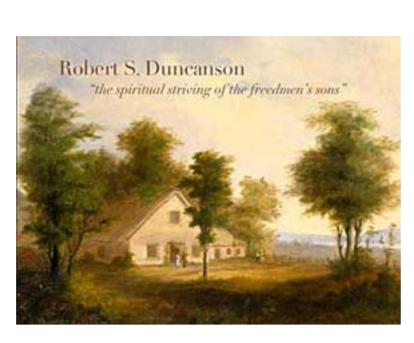
Artist Robert S. Duncanson: What's in a (Middle) Name?

by Jeanne Schinto

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Works by the 19th-century African-American artist who signed himself "Robert S. Duncanson," "R.S. Duncanson," or simply "Duncanson" are increasingly in demand, and with that has come scrutiny of his middle initial "S" and what it stands for. Following the lead of auction house catalogs and the Internet, I have written his middle name as "Scott" in an article published in M.A.D. within the last year (see "Collectors Dominate African-American Fine Art Auction," May 2011), but in the last few months—most recently on February 3, when the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., announced that it had bought a still life by Duncanson (1821-1872) in a

private sale—I have noticed him



An exhibition curated by Joseph D. Ketner II, Robert S. Duncanson: The Spiritual Striving of the Freedmen's Sons, was on view at the Thomas Cole National Historic Site in Catskill, New York, from May 1 through October 30, 2011. The accompanying 34-page illustrated catalog, written by Ketner, amounts to a mini-biography of the artist. For more information, phone (518) 943-7465 or see the Web site (www.thomascole.org).

being referred to as "Robert Seldon Duncanson." I knew it was time to ask the question: Is this another one of those Fitz Hugh Lane/ Fitz Henry Lane situations?

Nigel Freeman, Swann Galleries' African-American fine art specialist, said yes, adding that the dissemination of the correct information is largely due to the efforts of Joseph D. Ketner II.

Ketner, I learned, has been studying Duncanson for 36 years. I reached him by phone at his office at Emerson College in Boston, where he is the Henry and Lois Foster Chair in Contemporary Art Theory and Practice and the college's Distinguished Curator-in-Residence. He said the erroneous attribution of "Scott" to the "S" in Duncanson's name is "a twentieth-century construction," the result of another error, namely that the artist's father was a white Scottish-Canadian. In fact, both of Duncanson's parents were Virginians who moved to Fayette, New York, around the turn of the 19th century, and neither was white, said Ketner, who has tracked the Duncanson family in every U.S. Census from 1820 through 1900. Rather, they were described as "mulatto" and/or "free colored persons" and were undoubtedly seeking opportunities in the North after slavery was abolished there.

According to Ketner, an oral history account by Francis Carr Wright, an amateur historian in Mount Healthy, Ohio, inaugurated the mistake about the race and nationality of Duncanson's father. A follower of Hudson River school painter Thomas Cole (1801-1848), Duncanson lived and painted landscapes in the Ohio River valley, beginning in the 1840's. In fact, he is considered the preeminent landscape painter of the region, having had the place to himself once William L. Sonntag (1822-1900) and T. Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910) left for New York City. Wright's error was published in a 1924 article in the *Cincinnati* Enquirer, "Robert S. Duncanson, A Cincinnatian Who Became World Famous as an Artist."

The error was repeated in an article about Duncanson by James A. Porter, the first monographic study on the artist, published in the October 1951 issue of Art in America, and it has been reiterated ever since. As recently as September 25, 2010, there it was again, in an essay by John Wilmerding published in the Wall Street Journal.

As for the "Scott," Ketner said he presumes that the myth of the Scottish ancestry morphed into a middle name that echoed it. He doesn't know who first made that mistake, but he can cite its earliest appearance in print. It occurred in Two Centuries of Black American Art (1976) by David C. Driskell, who published it without a footnote referencing his source.

So how and when did Ketner determine that Seldon was the correct name? He credits Julie Aronson, curator of American painting, sculpture, and drawings at the Cincinnati Art Museum, who came upon it about two years ago. "I had been looking for a primary resource that listed his middle name since the seventies, and this woman found it."

Aronson made her discovery in the article "Artists and the Fine Arts Among Colored People" in the January 1860 issue of Repository of Religion and Literature. "It is the sole mention of Duncanson's middle name as 'Seldon,'" Ketner stated. "And the same book confirms all the census biographical information that I first published twenty years ago and have amplified, as I have gotten more information, in the intervening time."

How Ketner became interested in Duncanson is another story in which serendipity played a role. It was 1976, and he was studying European art history at Indiana University when a girlfriend took him to meet her grandparents in Cincinnati. "So I'm introduced to the family, and because I'm an art history student, we went into the city to see the museums." At the Taft Museum of Art, Ketner saw a number of "huge landscape paintings—really fine paintings."

There were eight of them, commissioned by the lawyer and horticulturist Nicholas Longworth (1782-1863), who owned the mansion, called Belmont, that is now the museum. More information about these imaginary landscapes and Duncanson is on the museum's Web site (www.taftmuseum.org), but on the day when Ketner was visiting, he was "Robert S. Duncanson." So Ketner asked the security guard about him.

informed only by "a little card leaning on the wainscoting" that said "He told me, 'Oh, he was a slave of the landowner. He painted them.' And I thought, 'Mmmm, I don't think so.' So when I got back to Indiana, I conducted a little project to find out who this guy was." The little project led to a larger one, and then more, and more. Said

Ketner, author of *The Emergence of the African-American Artist:* Robert S. Duncanson, 1821-1872 (University of Missouri Press, 1993), "That's essentially how Duncanson took over my life."

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