

The Landscape Within: Solitude and Selfhood in the Work of Asher B. Durand

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Asher B. Durand (1796-1886) was an exemplary public figure in Jacksonian America. Far from concerning himself solely with his own career, he was the epitome of a civic-minded, publicly engaged cultural leader. He participated in some of New York's most prominent arts and literary organizations, played an important role in the founding and leadership of the National Academy of Design, and encouraged the ambitions of young artists through his published essays on landscape painting. As H. Daniel Peck notes, "Durand was perhaps the preeminent organization man of American art in the antebellum period" – and Durand's presence and influence was widely felt in the New York art community for the majority of the nineteenth century.¹

Yet despite Durand's deep involvement in the public realm, he often expressed in his letters a need to balance the agitations of urban living and the demands of institutional management with frequent retreats into nature. In fact, as some scholars and critics have suggested, Durand's decision to fully take up landscape painting after many years as a successful engraver and portrait painter may have been due in part to his overwhelming personal need to distance himself from the city and its toll on the mind, body, and spirit.² His landscape paintings and essays show that he had a great sympathy for the human need for solitude and affirmation of the self. They also show that he believed in an artistry that insisted on the incremental growth of one's personal convictions and experiences. His paintings provide virtual dwelling places for solitude, and his essays espouse learning through direct experience. By studying some of Durand's paintings and essays, this paper explores how his art and writing encourages us, through the medium of nature, to dwell in solitude and strengthen our sense of selfhood.

A Portrait of Durand

When Durand died in September 1886 at the age of ninety-one,³ his obituary in the *New York Times* (Fig.1) called him the "Nestor of American artists," referring to the elderly chieftain in Homer's *Iliad* who gives advice to the younger Greek warriors as they engage in the Trojan War. The comparison of Durand to the mythological Nestor is obvious: both men were considered veterans within their respective fields, father figures of their particular professions. Like Nestor, who in Homer's epic poem is respected by the younger Greek warriors for the battles he had fought in his youth and for the wise counsel he now gives in his twilight years, Durand was

¹ H. Daniel Peck, "Unlikely Kindred Spirits: A New Vision of Landscape in the Works of Henry David Thoreau and Asher B. Durand," in *American Literary History* (Winter 2005), p. 687.

² Henry Tuckerman, for example, suggests that Durand left engraving for landscape painting because the latter allowed him to enjoy "the free air which he breathed while exploring scenery, [and which] had become as requisite for health as a wider range for his mental development." See Henry Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Son, 1867), p.192.

³ Some sources mention that Durand died at the age of ninety, but since he was born on 21 August 1796 and died on 17 September 1886, he had already celebrated his ninety-first birthday approximately a month before he passed away.

appreciated not only for his own artwork but also for his commitment to the broader art community. In the 1820s, he was involved in a number of arts and literary clubs that later became some of the most important cultural organizations in New York. In the nineteenth century, they played a major role in New York's cultural life, and most of them are still extant and active today. In 1825, Durand became a member of James Fenimore Cooper's Bread and Cheese Club, which later played an instrumental role in the founding of the Century Association. That same year, he chaired a meeting at the New-York Historical Society to form the New York Drawing Association, which would later become the National Academy of Design. As president of the Academy from 1845 to 1861, he witnessed one of its most formative periods of growth and influence.⁴ By these accounts, Durand was clearly as dedicated to the broader progress of American art as to the advancement of his own career – an endeavor that did not go unnoticed within the art world and the general public. As the *Times* obituary states,

Quite as much as any one else [Durand] helped place American art on a higher plane. Working unceasingly for more than half a century with this sole end in view he not only achieved fame himself, but in his older days was fortunate enough to see the marked progress art had made, which advance in a great measure those who live today believe was due to his efforts.⁵

Furthermore, just as Nestor is endearingly described in the *Iliad* as a “clear-voiced” orator who speaks words that are “sweeter than honey,” Durand's warm, affable manner was as defining a characteristic of his identity as his artistic achievement. Indeed, while the *Times* obituary notes Durand's success as a landscape painter, it also enthusiastically praises his “noble and manly traits,” his “kindheartedness and generosity,” and his alacrity in aiding his fellow colleagues and younger artists. In a memorial address honoring Durand, the artist Daniel Huntington affirmed that “[t]he whole fraternity of artists were proud of [Durand's] achievements, revered his character, and looked up to him with affection.”⁶

The respect and fondness the art community felt towards Durand is visible in Huntington's monumental portrait of the artist (Fig.2). Painted in 1857 while Durand was in his twelfth year as president of the National Academy of Design, this portrait is a characteristic portrayal of an institutional leader: wise, dignified, displayed with the products or emblems of his contribution to American culture. Like Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington as ideal leader of the new republic (Fig.3) or Charles Willson Peale's self-portrait as magisterial founder of the Philadelphia Museum (Fig.4), Huntington's portrait of Durand summarizes in visual shorthand

⁴ For more on Durand's associations with these organizations, see Barbara Dayer Gallati, “Asher B. Durand's Early Career: A Portrait of the Artist as an Ambitious Man,” in *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape*, ed. Linda S. Ferber (New York: Brooklyn Museum, in association with D Giles Limited, London, 2007): pp. 45-81. See also Linda S. Ferber, “Asher B. Durand, American Landscape Painter,” in *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape*, ed. Linda S. Ferber (New York: Brooklyn Museum, in association with D Giles Limited, London, 2007): pp. 127-203.

⁵ For Durand's obituary, see “An Old Time Artist Dead,” *New York Times*, 20 September 1886.

⁶ For more information on the character of Nestor, see Hanna Roisman, “Nestor the Good Counselor,” *Classical Quarterly* 55.1 (2005): pp. 17-38; see also Homer, *The Illiad*, trans. Rodney Merrill (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 35. For Durand's obituary, see “An Old Time Artist Dead,” *New York Times*, 20 September 1886. For this passage from Daniel Huntington's memorial address, see John Durand, *The Life and Times of Asher B. Durand*, (Hensonville, NY: Black Dome Press, 2006; original edition published by Charles Scribner's Son, 1894), p. 209.

his sitter's claim to fame: with palette and brushes in hand, seated beside an easel on which a painted landscape rests, and with nature itself as his backdrop, Durand can be assured that his role as leading landscape painter and senior member of the art community will be communicated clearly to future generations.

But in addition to identifying the particular deeds and achievements of their sitters, the best portraits also include subtle details that hint at the more nuanced, elusive aspects of their subjects' personalities. Consider, for example, the dramatic contrast between sunlit and cloudy sky in the background of Huntington's portrait of Durand. Diagonally intersecting the sitter's head, this partition between light and dark suggests the balanced quality of Durand's life and sensibility: somberness countered by cheerfulness, depression tempered by optimism, calmness in the face of ominous weather.

Another easily overlooked detail in the portrait is the direction of Durand's gaze. It appears at first as though Durand is looking out at the viewer, but no matter where the viewer stands in relation to the painting, Durand is not actually aiming his gaze at the observer but rather slightly above and beyond towards the upper right, fixed on a more distant object in his line of vision. This gives his gaze a poetic, dreamy quality that might not be immediately discernible upon initial observation of this portrait.

Thirdly, there is a curious physical affinity between Durand, the canvas on the easel, and the landscape in the background. These three major components in the painting – Art as represented by the canvas and easel, Nature as represented in the background, and Human as represented by Durand himself – share the same color scheme. Durand's hair, face, and clothing share the same colors as the landscape behind him, as does the painted landscape on the easel. For example, the pinks, blues, and grays of Durand's face and head, as well as the green and brown of his clothing, also compose the landscape features behind him; these same colors also make up the painted landscape on the easel. Art, Nature, and Human are thus interrelated in a way that suggests they are made of the same raw materials – blurring, even if ever so slightly, the existential boundaries between them.

What nuanced, elusive qualities do these details reveal about Durand's personality? What more do they add to the portrait's communication of the artist's profession and the genre in which he worked? Let us consider the sky in the background as our starting point.

During the course of his long career as a landscape painter, Durand occasionally depicted stormy weather or dramatic skies such as those seen in 1854's *June Shower* (Fig.5) or 1838's *Landscape, Sunset* (Fig.6). But these are rare. For the most part Durand's skies, particularly in his mature works, are calm and softly luminous, and rarely are they portrayed with as much pictorial contrast as in the split between light and dark in Huntington's portrait. Thus, Huntington's intention in portraying the sky in this particular manner was not to mimic Durand's own style of painting, but more likely to suggest a particular aspect of Durand's personality. With keen insight into human nature, Huntington wrote that Durand had "a certain serenity of spirit which checked and soothed the restless fever of the creative brain; a fever often so violent...as to cause a deep and sometimes fatal reaction and depression.... [yet] Durand formed

a habit of working on and on cheerily till the coveted prize was gained.”⁷ Huntington’s description of Durand’s peaceful and cheerful disposition countering his feelings of depression and violent agitations centers on the idea of balance: overwhelming emotions borne of creative passion can be tempered by the habit of working steadily and cheerfully. Huntington also remarked that Durand’s “love of nature was a passion, an enthusiasm always burning within him, but it was like a steady fire, not a sudden blaze quickly sinking into ashes.”⁸

These descriptions of Durand’s character suggest that, in Huntington’s view, steadiness of character was a virtue in an artist. More generally, it also suggests that the concept of human life as constantly out of balance and in need of equilibrium resonated in Durand’s thinking. In fact, Durand’s son and biographer, John Durand, described that his father persistently sought to achieve “an even tenor” of life: whenever Durand felt plagued by worries caused by health problems, the deaths of family members, the demands of work, and particularly the financial and political troubles at the National Academy of Design, he would go into the country “for rest and to console himself...”⁹ Retreating into nature was Durand’s way of countering the personal and professional afflictions that he associated with urban living.

Nature’s Interior

That Durand attributed many of his ills and worries to urban life is clear in his personal letters, one of which was addressed to his friend and colleague Thomas Cole. In it, Durand described the city as a “miserable little pen, enclosing 250,000 human animals or more.”¹⁰ In response, Cole praised the virtues of rural living and encouraged Durand to spend time out of the city. Cole’s letter illustrates the extent of Durand’s desire for relief from city living:

I am sorry that you are at times so much depressed in spirits. You must come to live in the country.... Your expression is the result of debility; you require the pure air of heaven. You sit (I know you do) in a close, air-tight room, toiling, stagnating, and breeding dissatisfaction at all you do, when if you had the untainted breeze to breathe, your body would be invigorated, your spirits buoyant.... I merely wish to convince you that, provided you could consistently leave the city, you would be in better health and spirits...¹¹

This letter was written in 1837, which many scholars mark as the watershed year of Durand’s decision to abandon portrait painting to take up landscape full-time. The contents of Cole’s letter reveal to us that for Durand, landscape painting was not only a professional ambition, but also a very real and practical solution to his mental and physical burdens. Durand suffered from chronic dyspepsia, witnessed the long illness and early death of his first wife Lucy, and relocated his children from the city during the cholera outbreak of 1832. To Durand, then, the reward of such a landscape career was not only an increase in professional status but also in his, and his

⁷ For Daniel Huntington’s memorial address, see Durand, *The Life and Times of Asher B. Durand*, p. 208.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, p. 83.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 140.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 141.

family's, health and sanity. In their research on the role of Durand's landscapes in the context of nineteenth-century health reform, Rebecca Bedell and Charles Colbert convincingly demonstrate that Durand intended his paintings to serve a therapeutic purpose for a society that increasingly felt the negative health effects of rapid urbanization and technological advance. Nineteenth-century physicians, phrenologists, health reformers, landscape designers, and directors of mental institutions attributed nervousness, anxiety, debility, and an entire slew of other physical and mental disorders to urban living. Reformers saw the creation of expansive public parks, pastoral cemeteries, peaceful mental asylums, and restful pleasure grounds as preventatives and antidotes to this problem.¹² As Linda S. Ferber notes, there was a widespread "anti-urban bias" during this era, and Durand's perception of the dichotomy between healthful rural life and debilitating city living was a product of his time.¹³ And according to Stephen Nissenbaum, the 1830s marked an explosion in new anxieties about the human body, evident in the pamphlets, advice columns, and health trends that permeated the public.¹⁴ Undoubtedly, Durand counted himself among the victims of urban life; through the pursuit of landscape painting, he also envisioned himself as part of the solution.

What clues do we have of Durand's intentions to aid his fellow sufferers with his landscape paintings? The strongest evidence is a compositional decision which many art historians cite as a key moment in the development of Durand's unique landscape style. It set him apart from his predecessor Cole as well as other landscape artists, and made him an innovator in the genre of landscape painting. This compositional decision was the switch of the traditional landscape composition from a horizontal format to a vertical one, seen for the first time in Durand's oeuvre in *The Beeches* (Fig.7).¹⁵ It may seem remarkably simple, but the re-orientation of a landscape's canvas dramatically affects the way the image is perceived: it allows for a more intimate dialogue between viewer and painted image, creating the illusion that the observer is closer to the painted scene. When *The Beeches* was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1846, critics praised the monumental painting for its calming and absorbing effect, marveling at how it enabled viewers to imaginatively "step from the floor of the Academy into a quiet country spot, where the noises of omnib[uses], brokers and old clothes-men are shut out forever."¹⁶

¹² See Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1997); Rebecca Bedell, "'Nature is a Sovereign Remedy': Durand and the Absorptive Landscape," in *The New-York Journal of American History* 66:4 (2007): pp. 83-92; Rebecca Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology and American Landscape Painting, 1825-1875* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001). Bedell derives much of her research from Kenneth Blair Hawkins's dissertation on the role of landscape theory in the design of insane asylums and public parks in 1800s America; the dissertation provides a strong sense of the close link between landscape and health in the nineteenth century. See Kenneth Blair Hawkins, *The Therapeutic Landscape: Nature, Architecture, and Mind in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1991).

¹³ Ferber, "Asher B. Durand, Landscape Painter," *Kindred Spirits*, p. 130.

¹⁴ Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

¹⁵ Commissioned in 1845 by the merchant Abraham M. Cozzens, *The Beeches* was originally entitled *Landscape, Composition*. However, according to John Durand, this painting was entitled *Passage through the Woods*. See Durand, *The Life and Times of Asher B. Durand*, p. 173; Ferber, "Asher B. Durand, American Landscape Painter," *Kindred Spirits*, p. 148.

¹⁶ "Editor's Table: National Academy of Design," *Knickerbocker* 27 (May 1846), p. 464; quoted in David B. Lawall, *Asher B. Durand: A Documentary Catalogue of the Narrative and Landscape Paintings* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1978), p. 52.

Indeed, everything in the composition ushers viewers in: the gently winding road that leads our eyes into the picture's depth, the beech and basswood trees that visually enclose us within the composition's frame, and the progressively golden light that draws our attention into the distance. The immediate foreground, with its pleasant shade and its inviting carpet of grassy forest floor, serves to ease our mental transition from our real space into the composition's painted terrain. Art historians often cite John Constable's *The Cornfield* (Fig.8) as a possible precedent for *The Beeches*, and indeed it is highly probable that Durand encountered Constable's painting during his sojourn to Europe.¹⁷ However, there is a subtle difference between Durand's and Constable's paintings: in *The Beeches*, the foreground trees loom very close to the picture plane and seem to hover directly over the viewer's head. The trees serve a protective function for the viewer by creating the effect of an interior space even though the setting is clearly outdoors. The trees are nature's own walls and roof, and the shade they create marks the viewer's own little room. From this interior foreground space, the beholder can safely and leisurely observe the larger exterior world that lies in the distance. The German artist Caspar David Friedrich created a similar sense of interior space in the foregrounds of his compositions (Figs.17-18), using them as observation decks from which his human figures could survey sublime, dramatic landscapes. Durand's landscapes are decidedly more calm and pastoral, but in the case of both artists, these "spatial anterooms"¹⁸ function as mediators between the observers and the larger exterior world beyond them.

After *The Beeches*, Durand employed the composition of the forest interior over and over again (Figs.9-13), increasingly emphasizing the interior effect of the foreground space. He intensifies the seclusion of the sites, making them more effective places for solitude. In these two paintings (Figs.12-13), for example, Durand screens out the exterior world completely. The viewer experiences a state of being deeply hidden in nature. This feeling of enclosure strengthens one's sense of selfhood. As the philosopher Gaston Bachelard has written, when we dwell in small, intimate spaces, our internal lives seem to deepen and expand; our sense of personhood grows when we are enclosed in nooks and crannies, when physical boundaries fit around us snugly to help us define and secure the essence of who we are.¹⁹

The Exercise of Perception

The foreground trees themselves play an integral role in this enhancement of selfhood. Many critics and scholars have noted the anthropomorphic qualities of Durand's trees,²⁰ but Barbara Novak's thoughts about the human aspects of Durand's trees may be the most intriguing. She writes:

¹⁷ Barbara Dayer Gallati, "The Beeches," in *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School*, ed. John K. Howat (New York: The Metropolitan Museum, 1987), p.105-106.

¹⁸ I borrow the term "spatial anteroom" from Angela Miller, *Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 244.

¹⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, 2nd translated edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994; 1st translated edition published by Orion Press, 1964; original French edition published as *La poétique de l'espace* by Presses Universitaires de France, 1958).

²⁰ See, for example, David Lawall, *Durand: His Art and Theory in Relation to His Times* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), pp. 320, 371, 472; Tuckerman, *Book of Artists*, p. 193.

Each tree for Durand is different. He draws each with a loving attention to the slope of the tree trunk, the delicacy of a branch, the fragility of each twig and leaf. What was he after? ...My own feeling is that each painting or drawing attempts to capture each tree's essence, for each tree has an essence of its own, just as each human being has an essence.... It is as though he is reaching into the forest, into the group, to find the individual, and each individual, as we know from our own fingerprints, is unique in the world....²¹

This passage captures the complexity of how these trees assert the viewer's own sense of individuality. The meticulous specificity with which Durand depicts his trees parallels the extent of uniqueness that humans ascribe to their individual selves. The true and full character of a human being can only be known through familiarity and time spent in his or her company. Under varying circumstances, different aspects of an individual's personality emerge, and only through long-term acquaintance with that person can we witness the full spectrum of his or her character.

When we observe Durand's drawings and paintings of trees (Figs.14-16), we can tell that he has spent much time studying their forms: we sense the slow, incremental succession of his strokes of pencil or paint. It seems as though each tree he depicts was brought into existence through the cumulative response of his hand to each successive glance that he casts upon the real tree. For Durand, repetitive observation and the exercise of perception led to a true knowledge of each object's essence. In his famous "Letters on Landscape Painting," a series of essays he wrote in 1855 for the art journal *The Crayon*, he advises young landscape painters to develop an intimacy with nature's forms by spending time drawing them. As Peck has noted, "For Durand, to draw was to observe and to learn, and only incrementally to understand."²² And indeed, according to Durand, one does not truly know something in its entirety within a single glance; rather, knowledge is acquired through an incremental process of perceiving the object again and again, studying each of its features carefully, until the full picture gradually comes into view. In "Letters on Landscape Painting," Durand writes:

If your subject be a tree, observe particularly wherein it differs from those of other species; in the first place, the termination of its foliage, best seen when relieved on the sky, whether pointed or rounded, drooping or springing upward.... [N]ext mark the character of its trunk and branches, the manner in which the latter shoot off from the parent stem, their direction, curves, and angles. Every kind of tree has its traits of individuality.... [W]ith careful attention, these peculiarities are easily learned.... Practice...till you shall have learned by heart the characteristic forms of all objects...²³

²¹ Barbara Novak, "Mapping Durand," in *The New-York Journal of American History* 66:4 (2007), p.15-16.

²² Peck, "Unlikely Kindred Spirits," *American Literary History*, p. 695.

²³ Asher B. Durand, Letter II, *Crayon* 1, no. 3 (January 17, 1855): pp. 34-35; reprinted in *Kindred Spirits*, pp. 234-235.

As this passage demonstrates, Durand insisted that aspiring landscape artists learn their craft through direct observation and personal experience in the field. He warns them against clinging too closely to the theories and instructions of their masters, which would endanger their own identities and make them into mere imitators. “Every true artist has his *own* manner,” he wrote, and “direct reference to the original source” would assist each young artist in developing it. For Durand, the purpose of pursuing landscape painting was not to make money or gain a secure profession. In fact, he wrote that “It is better to make shoes, or dig potatoes, or follow any other honest calling to secure a livelihood, than seek the pursuit of Art for the sake of gain.” Rather, Durand asserts, the pursuit of studying nature should be for its benefits “on the mind and heart,” and the landscape paintings that are produced out of such study should likewise soothe the wearied souls of fellow human beings.²⁴

The Body in Nature

Reading Durand’s “Letters on Landscape Painting,” we sense his strong belief in the power of perception: its ability to uncover truths about nature and the structure of its forms. But we also sense his belief that the human ability to perceive deeply affects one’s own well-being. In a number of remarkable studies from nature made in the mid 1850s and early 1860s, Durand engages viewers in the same exercise of perception that he espouses in the “Letters on Landscape Painting” (Figs.19-20). In these highly detailed, closely observed paintings, Durand brings us down to the depths of the forest floor, confronting us with writhing roots, weathered rocks, and crumbling earth banks. He monumentalizes these elements of nature and presses them close to the surface of the canvas, as though invoking identification between our human bodies and these organic forms steeped in the cyclical process of decay and regeneration. His meticulous rendering of the objects directs our attention from detail to detail, encouraging it to circulate throughout the canvas until we, too, begin to acquire a certain knowledge of these forms through the progressive accumulation of our glances.

In his research on theories of how people experienced vision in the nineteenth century, Jonathan Crary states that nineteenth-century modernity “subverts even the possibility of a contemplative beholder.” Railway travel, department stores, advertisements, the diversity of crowds, and the numerous other realities of urban life vied for people’s visual attention. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that in this milieu, “one instinctively resists taking in anything, taking anything deeply, to ‘digest’ anything; a weakening of the power to digest results from this.”²⁵ It seems that Durand’s studies from nature attempt to counter this “weakening of the power to [visually] digest [deeply]” by exercising observers’ abilities to perceive the world slowly and incrementally. Time slows down in these paintings of the forest floor. Time is measured by the organic rhythms of nature, not by the mechanized fragmentation of hours into minutes and seconds. The forest floor community – the trees, rocks, and soil – are governed not by human-made laws but the laws of nature.

²⁴ Asher B. Durand, Letter I, *Crayon* 1, no. 1 (January 3, 1855): 1-2; Letter II, *Crayon* 1, no. 3 (January 17, 1855): 34-35; Letter IV, *Crayon* 1, no. 7 (February 14, 1855): 97-98; Letter VII, *Crayon* 1, no. 18 (May 2, 1855): 273-275; reprinted in *Kindred Spirits*, pp. 233-235, 238-239, 245-247.

²⁵ For Nietzsche’s quote, see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 23.

The trees and rocks and soil are shown in the midst of growth and decay. In *Study from Nature: Rocks and Trees in Catskill, New York* (Fig. 19), the soil of the earth bank crumbles and the rocks have obviously been worn into their present shapes through the effects of time. The roots of the trees creep over the pebbles and soil, and lichen grow on the rocks. Underneath this forest floor, an entire microcosm is in the process of slow transformation. The scene is pressed very close to the picture surface, and thus the viewer is placed in the midst of these natural processes. The closeness of the viewer to the depicted scene and the emphasis on the physical transformation of organic matter reinforces the beholder's awareness of his or her own body and its own internal processes. The highly tactile quality of the rocks, trees, and forest undergrowth links our sense of touch to our sight, so that as we study the depicted objects our imaginings of their textures are also vividly recalled. Just as Durand's forest interiors invite viewers to imaginatively "step into" the pictorial terrain by using the foreground's spatial anteroom to mediate between observers' real space and the painted scene, these paintings of the forest floor engage viewers through the close cropping of the pictorial frame and the visceral evocation of touch. Both types of composition *incarnate* viewers into the landscape, affirming the presence of their bodies in nature. Durand wrote that the best landscapes "at once takes possession of you – draws you into it – you traverse it – breathe its atmosphere – feel its sunshine, and you repose in its shade."²⁶

Revisiting the Portrait of Durand

Durand understood from personal experience that city-dwellers needed places for solitude and the restoration of their sense of self. In *The Life and Times of Asher B. Durand*, John Durand attributes his father's lifelong love for nature to his idyllic childhood home in Jefferson Village, New Jersey: "The charm of wild solitude, the perfect repose of nature 'undisturbed by the voice of man,' which my father early enjoyed in his frequent rambles over this mountain, had much to do with shaping his taste for art."²⁷ And indeed Durand once described that, for the wearied merchant or capitalist who returns home exhausted from a long day of work, sitting before some landscapes might transport him from the "discordant clamor and conflict of the crowded landscape" to a rural setting – *perhaps to the idyllic haunts of his childhood* – where "a gentle breeze fans his forehead" and his "care and anxiety...[can] retire far behind him" (emphasis mine).²⁸ That Durand should aim to use his landscape paintings to help bring businessmen and professionals back to the "idyllic haunts of [their] childhood" attests to the rapid urbanization that took place in Jacksonian America. These businessmen and professionals (including Durand himself) grew up in the countryside, but ambition for better opportunities led them to the cities, which grew even more rapidly with the passing of each decade of the 1800s. Within Durand's own lifetime, New York City had grown from a small provincial municipality of just 100,000 residents to the second largest city worldwide. The city's infrastructures, businesses, services, recreation grounds, cultural life, and other habits of life developed at a dramatic pace.²⁹

²⁶ Asher B. Durand, Letter III, *Crayon* 1, no. 5 (January 31, 1855): 66-67; reprinted in *Kindred Spirits*, 236.

²⁷ Durand, *The Life and Times of Asher B. Durand*, p. 5.

²⁸ Asher B. Durand, "Letters on Landscape Painting," Letter IV, quoted in Linda S. Ferber, *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape* (New York: Brooklyn Museum, in association with D Giles Limited, London, 2007), p. 239.

²⁹ Kenneth T. Jackson, "Asher B. Durand's New York: The Life of the City in the Nineteenth Century," *Kindred Spirits*, 27-43.

This historical context explains the seriousness with which Durand ascribed to his landscape paintings for the benefit of society. Such rapid changes in the urban environment placed pressures on the human mind and body that required balance in order to maintain wholeness. In Huntington's portrait of Durand, the idea of a balanced life is reflected in the sky. Durand understood the importance of tempering extremes and maintaining mental and physical equilibrium in life. By painting forest interiors and the depths of the forest floor, he gave viewers opportunities to dwell in solitude and engage in the "slow-time" of nature's processes. By engaging in these paintings, they might also reverse their experience of the ill-effects of urban life and achieve a measure of balance.

Maintaining wholeness means feeling secure in one's identity while also being aware of one's participation in a larger whole. Durand's averted gaze in Huntington's painting suggests his integrity to his personal vision. As we have seen, his "Letters on Landscape Painting" repeatedly emphasizes the importance of developing one's own perspective of the world through direct experience. Here, Durand aims his gaze at an object of his own vision, giving his demeanor the same poetic and philosophical quality apparent in his essays.

Also poetic in Huntington's portrait of Durand is how the colors that make up the landscape painting on the easel are also the colors that describe the landscape features in the background and the features of Durand's face. This fusing together of Nature, Human, and Art suggests the metaphysical idea that they are all made of the same raw materials, and furthermore, are involved in the same cycle of creative process. Nature produces trees and plants and other organic matter, humans study their forms and reproduce them as art. Other humans then engage in looking at this art, which might in turn inspire them to go into nature as well. For Durand, who had spent so much of his landscape career making excursions into nature and painting its diversity of forms, Nature, Human, and Art were part of a single creative process. In this creative process, Durand found his own source of solitude and selfhood.

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