

Joseph D. Ketner, *The Emergence of the African-American Artist: Robert S. Duncanson 1821-1872*, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 1993, 235 pp., 114 black-and white and 20 color illus., \$39.95

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- 16 Giovanni Boccaccio, *Della Geneologia de gli Dei, Libri Quindecim. Ne'quali si tratta dell'Origine, & discendenza di tutti gli Dei de' Gentili*. ... Trans. Gioseppe Betussi (Venice, 1585), 52v.
- 17 Boccaccio, *Della Geneologia de gli Dei*, treats the Graces on 52; music, singing, dancing, table games, odours and unguents, adultery, fornication, and lasciviousness, apples, swans pulling her chariot, doves, gold and silver, expensive clothing and tailors, laughter, and wine on 52v; Venus' control over the heart and ears, and waves on 53; her cold and wet complexion on 53v; flowers, myrtle, roses, and doves as birds of "gran coito," on 54; and mountainous regions on 54v.
- 18 One could also defer to such authors as Lucretius, Pliny, or Ovid in order to recognize the children of *Venus hortorum*, the rustic goddess of springtime. Consult Charles Dempsey, "Mercurius Ver: The Sources of Botticelli's Primavera," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XXXI (1968), 251-273, esp. 262 ff.; and recently, *idem*, *The Portrayal of Love. Botticelli's Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent* (Princeton, 1992). Or, similarly, one could consult Pliny, *Natural History*, Trans. H. Rackham, 10 vols., Loeb Classical Library, 1st ed. 1940 (London and Cambridge, Mass., 1947), chaps. 15.10 and 12.7.15, respectively, for the Venusian quinces, and oranges not mentioned by Boccaccio.
- 19 It is noteworthy that in his 1498 *Men in the Bathhouse*, Albrecht Dürer includes a man holding a flower, another drinking ale, one playing the flute, and a woman playing a stringed instrument resembling a viol. In other words, Dürer's bathhouse is replete with Venusian symbolism.
- 20 I wonder whether the bird is not a crane? Consult Luisa Cogliati Arano, *The Medieval Health Handbook. Tacuinum Sanitatis* (New York, 1976), nos. 169 and 170 (Paris, f. 70v; Casanatense, f. CXXXIII), for image and text concerning a crane falling prey to a falcon, its natural enemy.
- 21 Illustrated in *Il Palazzo della Ragione di Padova* (Venice, 1964). I suspect that the answer is to be found in the age-old relationship between Mercury, Saturn and the melancholic. See, for example, Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life. A Critical Edition and Translation with Introduction and Notes by Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies (Binghamton, New York, 1989), chap. I, iv.
- 22 Her discussion of the Marten de Vos image is focused on the chorographic component of the work (*i.e.*, the notion that planets rule geographical locations).
- 23 Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 95-128.
- 24 On the symbolism of masks, consult Moshe Barasch, "The Mask in European Art: Meanings and Functions," in *Art the Ape of Nature. Studies in Honor of H. W. Janson*. Ed. Moshe Barasch and Lucy Freeman Sandler (New York and Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1981), 253-264. On the sphinx, see, for example, Colin Eisler, *Dürer's Animals* (Washington and London, 1991), 292.
- 25 For this and the following, consult F. W. H. Hollstein, *German Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts, ca. 1400-1700*. Volume I: Achen - Altdorfer (Amsterdam, 1954), 48.
- 26 Noted in Phyllis Williams Lehmann, "The Sources and Meaning of Mantegna's Parnassus," in Phyllis Williams Lehmann and Karl Lehmann, *Samothracian Reflections. Aspects of the Revival of the Antique*, Bollingen Series XCII (Princeton, 1973), 156.
- 27 Lucretius, *De rerum natura*, 1.21 ff., quoted in Lehman, "Mantegna's Parnassus," in *Samothracian Reflections*, 160.

JOSEPH D. KETNER, *The Emergence of the African-American Artist: Robert S. Duncanson 1821-1872*, Columbia and London, University of Missouri Press, 1993, 235 pp., 114 black-and white and 20 color illus., \$39.95.

Robert Duncanson's contemporary reputation as one of the Midwest's premier exponents of the landscape style later called "the Hudson River School" is a remarkable fact in the history of North American art. As a man whose mother was a freed slave and whose paternal grandfather was a freed slave born of a slave and her owner, Duncanson laboured against powerful economic, social and educational disadvantages throughout his youth. Surmounting such obstacles to achievement in the realm of high culture, he came to produce very good paintings. Yet the correlation between status and gradations of colour that existed in the United States during the nineteenth century complicates this scenerio, for Duncanson's rather fair skin provided him with opportunities in the white-dominated world that were not available to a great many other African-Americans. Such a

system-within-a-system needs to be taken into account when assessing how Duncanson perceived himself, how he fared with other people in a variety of communities, and how people received his paintings.

In his new monograph, Joseph D. Ketner has assembled an impressive variety of material on a thirty-three-year career whose earliest document is an 1838 advertisement identifying Duncanson as one-half of a painter—glazier firm in Monroe, Michigan. Returning continually to the area around Cincinnati, Ohio, for much of his life, Duncanson travelled, painted and exhibited in other cities in the United States, Canada and Europe. Chronology organizes this well-illustrated book. Its reproductions are often very good; several of its twenty colour plates are excellent. Ketner supplements his text with a catalogue of extant paintings by the artist, judiciously noting that it represents an ongoing effort to gather data about Duncanson's *oeuvre*.

Yet the book neither argues nor gives substance to the broad thematic claims implicit in its title and embellishing its text: that there is such a thing as *the African-American*

artist and that Duncanson, exemplifying this category, brought about its emergence. Ketner makes these questionable assertions without analyzing the tensions that existed in Duncanson's personality, production and audience. His narrative thus imbues the most complete body of material ever assembled about the artist with an unfortunate homogeneity. Ketner seems to have been motivated by the understandable impulse to provide readers with a compelling story of individual triumph over racial discrimination. Analyzing contemporary discussions of the artist, he correctly notes that "In Duncanson's art...the abolitionist journalists discovered an exemplar of African-Americans' intellectual and cultural capabilities." (p. 45) Readers of critical art history may find this book disconcertingly similar to such nineteenth-century suasions.

A frequently used strategy for establishing the artist's achievement is the quotation of contemporary praise. Ketner also pens a number of tributes himself. One senses his loss of distance most acutely when he ventures that the unlocated and unseen *Prairie Fire* (1862) "must have been a truly sublime work" (p. 113). Analysis of individual paintings, texts and events is uneven. Ketner engages in the attractive enterprises of connecting Duncanson's frequent essays into paradisiacal imagery with a longing for a world without slavery and of identifying his Italian ruin pictures as a commentary upon the inevitable decline of slave-owning civilizations. The connections between *Land of the Lotus Eaters* (1861) and *Heart of the Andes* by Frederic E. Church (1859) are solid. Yet Ketner's interpretation of *Cliff Mine, Lake Superior 1848* as a critique of nature's destruction seems unfounded; commissioned by a mining investor, the painting is likely to have been both intended and received as a tribute to progress. Discussing an article from William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, Ketner misinterprets an account of a still-life arrangement's origin as the description of a genre scene. He reports Duncanson's birthdate of 1821 and his gift of a copy of Thomas Cole's *Garden of Eden* as facts, yet footnotes offer conflicting evidence.

The only time that Ketner ripples the smooth surface of his narrative is in the chapter entitled "'My heart has always been with the down-trodden race': The African-American Artist and Abolitionist Patronage." The quotation comes from a letter that Duncanson wrote against his son's accusation that he was "passing for white" to advance his financial status and social rank. At chapter's end, we learn that in the same letter he declared: "I care not for color [as an issue]." Ketner concludes that "Duncanson's statement reveals his clouded understanding of his position as an African-American artist in American culture." (p. 111) This remark closes the matter prematurely, yet it helps to precipitate distinctions between the painter's conception of himself, others' opinions

of him, and the uses to which historians can and do put the man. While one need not join his son in characterizing him as an opportunist, disinterested scrutiny of the artist's own conflicted views on race — a matter inextricable from his private sense of self and his public persona — could advance our understanding of his self-image in context. Further analysis needs to be done of the scant writing that survives from his hand; aside from two epistles quoted in the text, the footnotes cite an early clutch of letters. The book's claim that it will document the "terrible adversity" that Duncanson confronted goes unsubstantiated, and no evidence buttresses a description of the artist as "desperately struggling" (pp. 2, 88). To the contrary, the text gives the impression that Duncanson did not fare all that badly, supported as he was on a cushion of abolitionist patronage for much of his career.

Ketner's neglect of problems in historical reception causes him to miss the clear signal provided by a remarkable newspaper notice labelling *Uncle Tom and Little Eva* (1853) "an Uncle Tomitude." While the article explicitly criticizes only the painted figures, it seems likely that the writer was one of many who thought Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel degrading and damaging to African-Americans. Some found the Christian piety dominating Tom's character excessive, believing it to inculcate passivity and to retard the progress of African-American rights.¹ Abolitionists who sought radical changes from current conditions would have similarly condemned a painting of Eva predicting her imminent passage to heaven during a Bible lesson. (Such viewers could also have dismissed Duncanson's many excursions into paradise imagery as promoting escapist attitudes.) The published slur thus undermines Ketner's celebration of the painting as an unambiguous contribution to the abolitionist cause. Like the previously mentioned accusation that Duncanson was "passing for white," the newspaper notice indicates the diverse responses that the painter and his canvases inevitably provoked.

The abundant resources laid out by Ketner have the potential to generate a rich and complex history. While the identity of the United States as a country possessed of deeply racist currents is not in doubt, attention to the conflict and heterogeneity percolating through these documents would result in a more revealing and compelling volume. Duncanson and his art require further study.

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1 See Marva Banks, "Uncle Tom's Cabin and Antebellum Black Response," in *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*, ed. James L. Machor (Baltimore and London, 1993), 209-27.