

Efforts recognized to install tombstone at local artist's burial site

By **Blake Bacho**

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Robert S. Duncanson was a well-known African-American painter in the 1800s. He was buried in Monroe, in an unmarked grave. There's now a graveside marker for him.

Dora Kelley had heard of Robert S. Duncanson.

She knew he was a renowned African American landscape painter from the late 1800s and had been told he was buried in an unmarked grave at one of Monroe's cemeteries. But then in 2017, Kelley attended a lecture on Duncanson's work held at the Monroe County Museum. She was immediately inspired by what she saw.

"I was totally intrigued," Kelley said. "(His) art is incredible. I've been to Paris and everything, and this guy is right up there. The art is incredible."

Valerie Mercer, curator of African American Art and Head of the General Motors Center for African American Art at The Detroit Institute of Arts, conducted that fateful lecture. At the end of her talk, Mercer mentioned how the DIA had been trying to locate Duncanson's burial site.

Kelley raised her hand.

"I said 'I can do this,'" she said. "I went ahead and went for it ... I said 'I'm doing this.'"

On Thursday, Kelley and Mercer were back at the museum for a reception to celebrate the end of the journey to recognize Duncanson. They were joined by several other people who helped make this dream a reality, many of whom then journeyed out to the cemetery to see the fruits of their labor.

"When we go out today to see Robert Duncanson's headstone, I want you to feel proud," Kelley told the audience Thursday. "The fact that you cared enough to come here today, you are honoring Mr. Duncanson's memory."

Kelley was the last to speak, and she spent most of her time behind the mic thanking the many people who helped her complete her mission. This included Mercer and the DIA, along with the Detroit Fine Arts Breakfast Club (FABC), which helped fund the tombstone through an art auction, as well as Michael Huggins of Woodland Cemetery, who helped Kelley locate Duncanson's final resting place, and Leo LeClair of LeClair Monuments of Lambertville, who agreed to create the unique headstone for the artist at a fraction of what it would normally cost.

"The historic LaClair company, they took this project to another level for eternity," said Breakfast Club co-founder Henry Harper. "If you don't have a LaClair tombstone, you better run out and get one."

Mercer gave an abridged version of the lecture she presented in 2017 that first inspired Kelley. She talked about how Duncanson achieved a level of success in the art world that, at that time in American history, was unheard of for a person of color.

"It's one of the things about him that I always wonder," Mercer said. "How in the world did he do this in his time? There was no way that he could attend an art school, it just was not allowed for any African American to attend an institution of any kind to receive education, certainly not to study art."

"I really can't compare him to other African American artists of his time, because there is no one who had a career like he did in his time."

Mercer displayed several examples of Duncanson's work during her presentation, including 'Ellen's Isle, Loch Katrine,' one of Duncanson's better known pieces and the one that was incorporated into his headstone. Mercer admitted that she was initially skeptical the bold colors of the original work would be adequately represented on the marker, but she says she was impressed with the enamel process that was used.

"I'd love to meet the person that did that," she said. "That's quite the technique."

Museum director Andy Clark praised the grassroots effort to recognize this local historical figure. Clark presented plaques to Kelley, the DIA and the Detroit Fine Arts Breakfast Club, inscribed with a resolution, recently passed by the Monroe County Board of Directors, recognizing Duncanson for his contributions to art and history.

"I have to say I've been really inspired by the citizen effort to make this happen," Clark said. "This actually something that was done by the citizens, and I just think that is amazing and I really have to applaud that effort."