

Inaugural painting choice has Monroe connections

By Paula Wethington

Monroe News staff reporter

Posted Jan 25, 2021 at 11:11 AM

Robert Sheldon Duncanson was known both as a prominent African-American artist and as one of the most celebrated American landscape artists of the mid-1800s.

An artist whose painting was prominently displayed at President Joe Biden's Inaugural luncheon this week had family connections to Monroe and is buried here.

The artist is Robert Sheldon Duncanson, who was known both as a prominent African-American artist and as one of the most celebrated American landscape artists of the mid-1800s. There's an exhibit about the Duncanson family at the Monroe County Museum; he is buried in Woodland Cemetery.

His 1859 painting, "Landscape with Rainbow," got national attention this week.

As Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., explained, the traditions of the inaugural luncheon include a selecting a special artwork to set the tone amid a flurry of ceremonial gift-giving. With so many inauguration logistics forced to adapt to COVID-19 and security concerns because of the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol, some details of the day were worked out at the last minute. That included choosing a featured artwork.

Blunt explained that he asked Dr. Jill Biden, the incoming first lady, to help select the painting. This was the one she recommended. "Landscape with Rainbow" is currently in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum; and was loaned for the occasion.

"The rainbow is always a good sign," Blunt said at the program.

The Smithsonian lists Duncanson as "perhaps the most accomplished African-American painter in the United States from 1850 to 1860."

Duncanson spent most of his career in Cincinnati, Ohio. This was an area where abolitionists were active, and that's the hometown that was mentioned at the painting presentation. The Smithsonian's follow up report on the painting, posted at americanart.si.edu, said the landscape invokes a view of the Covington, Ky./Cincinnati, Ohio, area.

But as Gerry Wykes, exhibit coordinator of the Monroe County Museum explained, Duncanson also has strong family ties to Monroe and was buried here upon his death in 1872.

"We can claim him in a very strong way," Wykes said about Monroe.

As a result, the story of the painting this week in Washington D.C. got immediate attention of the local museum staff.

Just last fall, Dora Kelley was named the 2020 winner of the Museum's Spirit of Service Connection Award for her interest and assistance on Duncanson's life. His grave had remained unmarked, Kelley raised the money to buy and install a headstone at his site.

Also in celebration of Kelley's research, a Detroit Institute of Arts staff member, Valerie Mercer, gave a program in 2019 at the Monroe County Museum. The DIA has at least three of his paintings.

Wykes said the local Museum does not have any of Duncanson's celebrated paintings in its collection, although there are other memorabilia and items from his family on exhibit. There were others in the family who did house painting, decorative arts and other artwork, none as talented as he.

Duncanson was born in Seneca County, New York; before his family came to Monroe in 1928. As a young adult, he started a painting company in Monroe, the museum staff said in a Facebook post this week. But he quickly decided to move to Cincinnati and pursue a career in portrait painting. Duncanson often returned to visit family despite living in Ohio and also in Canada for a time.

In the meantime, he was able to study art in Europe through the help of sponsors.

"He was respected as an artist in his own right," Wykes said.

The fact that Duncanson was a Black American got attention then. It also may be is the reason people are rediscovering his work in recent years, the local historian said, adding there is an interest in discovering and celebrating Americans whose success and accomplishments may have been overlooked or forgotten.

The Smithsonian's report says this upon the honor of the luncheon selection:

"Duncanson painted this landscape on the eve of Civil War, a reminder of the power of landscape painting to convey America's cultural aspirations. Duncanson presents this scene as a vision of future peace and prosperity regardless of race — an aspiration we all should embrace."