

'Kindred Spirits' illustrates Asher B. Durand's passion for nature

by Robert L. Pincus

Try as you might, you won't find a painter who loved nature more than Asher Durand.

'KINDRED SPIRITS' - 'Kindred Spirits,' an icon of 19th-century American art, was in the recent Asher B. Durand exhibit at San Diego Museum of Art. CNS Photo courtesy of San Diego Museum of Art. "All the fascination of treatment in light, and, dark and color, are seen in Nature," he wrote in a series of published letters offered as advice to young painters.

These "Letters on Landscape Painting" appeared in 1855, in a leading art magazine, when Durand was at his peak of his fame - and just beginning to slide into elder statesmen status among American painters.

There are echoes of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays in Durand's "Letters," which is not surprising in that they are both proponents of the prevailing romanticism of the day. Walt Whitman, who reviewed Durand's paintings during his days as a journalist in the 1840s, was also influenced by Emerson as well as the rising school of American landscape painters. His first edition of "Leaves of Grass" appeared the same year as Durand's "Letters."

The painter's most famous work, without a doubt, is "Kindred Spirits." Its sale by the New York Public Library to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas (bankrolled by Wal-Mart heiress Alice Walton) made headlines and remains controversial. Many believe it should have stayed in New York, Durand's home for much of his adult life. The picture may not be among his best paintings, but it's one of the icons of American art.

"Kindred Spirits" captures some of the spirit and the history of his age. The leading landscape painter Thomas Cole, sketch portfolio under his arm, stands with the celebrated poet William Cullen Bryant on a rocky promontory. The setting is a favorite scene for painters, Kaaterskill Clove. Both painter and poet celebrated nature as the great subject of art and of course they are surrounded by it. Cole, a mentor to Durand, had died in 1848, prompting the picture. And in painting it, the implication was that Durand was his successor on the American scene.

The picture's message was - and is - open to debate. Frederick Church, a younger student of Cole's, had a stronger affinity for the dramatic symbolic panoramas more in keeping with Cole's approach. Durand had a greater feeling for more intimate scenes from nature.

table border="0" cellpadding="10" cellspacing="0" align="right"> "Kindred Spirits," assembled by the Brooklyn Museum of Art, is the biggest Durand exhibition in 35 years. It contains more than 50 paintings, drawings and engravings. The sweep of Durand's long career tells you a lot about the fate of the artist in the United States of the 1800s. Art instruction was hard to come by, and succeeding as an artist required a mix of vision and entrepreneurship.

His life, in fact, spanned much of that century. Durand was born in 1796 in what is now Maplewood, N.J., and lived until 1886 - an exceptional expanse of time in an era when life expectancy was between 45 and 50 in the United States.

Durand, who rendered trees and mountains as signs of the divine, began his career as the engraver of bank notes. For someone who could draw as well as Durand, this was a good way to pay the bills. Every bank printed its own notes in those days and engravings of well-known pictures sometimes sold well.

At age 16, in 1817, he became an apprentice to the well-established Peter Maverick in Newark, N.J. That same year they relocated to New York, where Durand was to live until 1869.

In 1820, his abilities came to the attention of the revered Revolutionary era painter John Trumbull. He wanted someone to do an engraved version of his famed painting "Declaration of Independence" - which hangs in the rotunda of the United States Capitol - and he decided that Durand was his man.

Seeing Durand's expert rendering of Trumbull's picture in the show, it's not hard to see that he could have made a career of this sort of thing. But it's just as clear he wanted to be taken seriously as a painter.

He turned to portraits first, between about 1832 and 1837. He had already proven himself adept with the engraved image. Durand attracted the attention of a major patron, Luman Reed, who commissioned him to do portraits of all seven American presidents. This was his big break.

The image of Andrew Jackson, which is among those on view, is gracefully done. But it comes across as a job well done, whereas his portrait of Cole (circa 1837) is full of emotion. Jackson appears full of himself while his artist friend has a self-contained kind of dignity, a regal bearing.

Durand was a mix of the idealist and the pragmatist. Vision and ambition came together in his landscapes, which consumed his energies from 1837 on.

He believed in the redemptive power of nature, spending as much as several months each year traveling to observe and commune with the land in the Adirondack Mountains and in New England. But he was well aware that landscape painting was the prime genre in the America of his day, more highly regarded in artistic circles than portraiture.

Like Cole, he painted big panoramic pictures that carried messages. "Progress (The Advance of Civilization)" (1853) is typical. The clouds and skies are radiant, the landscape lush. But civilization is advancing. There are houses and trains, even a town with a church steeple in the distance. A small group of Indians occupying a high wooded patch look on, curious and helpless to stop the rise of civilization.

But to contemporary eyes, pictures like this seem like calculating set pieces, designed to make people feel as if there were no conflict between the natural landscape Durand revered and the encroaching civilization. We know there was, though only a small portion of the population acknowledged it.

Durand was more interested in the close observation of nature than making sweeping visual statements. You can see how much pleasure he derived from drawing mountains, rocks and trees. Lest you think these are predictable subjects, see what he made of them.

When Durand shifted to canvas, his powers of observation and draftsmanship took on a larger eloquence. The structure of "In the Woods" (1855) pulls your eye into and through the landscape, as if you are physically navigating it. He also invites you to linger over its details - the way light falls across the grand tree on the right, with its patches of moss, and the way sky and trees create an intricate pattern that fills the painting. When he feels no need to moralize, the paintings take on the kind of life he articulates in his "Letters."

The strength of Durand's landscapes is in the equal weight he gives to detail and sweep. In the 1860s, a new generation of painters found him and other Hudson River School painters old-fashioned. But "Rocky Cliff" (1860), with its attention to one group of rocks and every gradation of color and texture on its surface, is rigorous and a surprisingly modern painting.

Durand stopped working altogether by 1878 or 1879, and was mostly forgotten by the American art world by the time he died. But in the general panorama of 19th century American painting, a subject of dramatically rising interest since the 1960s, Durand matters. It's doubtful he'll be fading into obscurity any time soon.

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