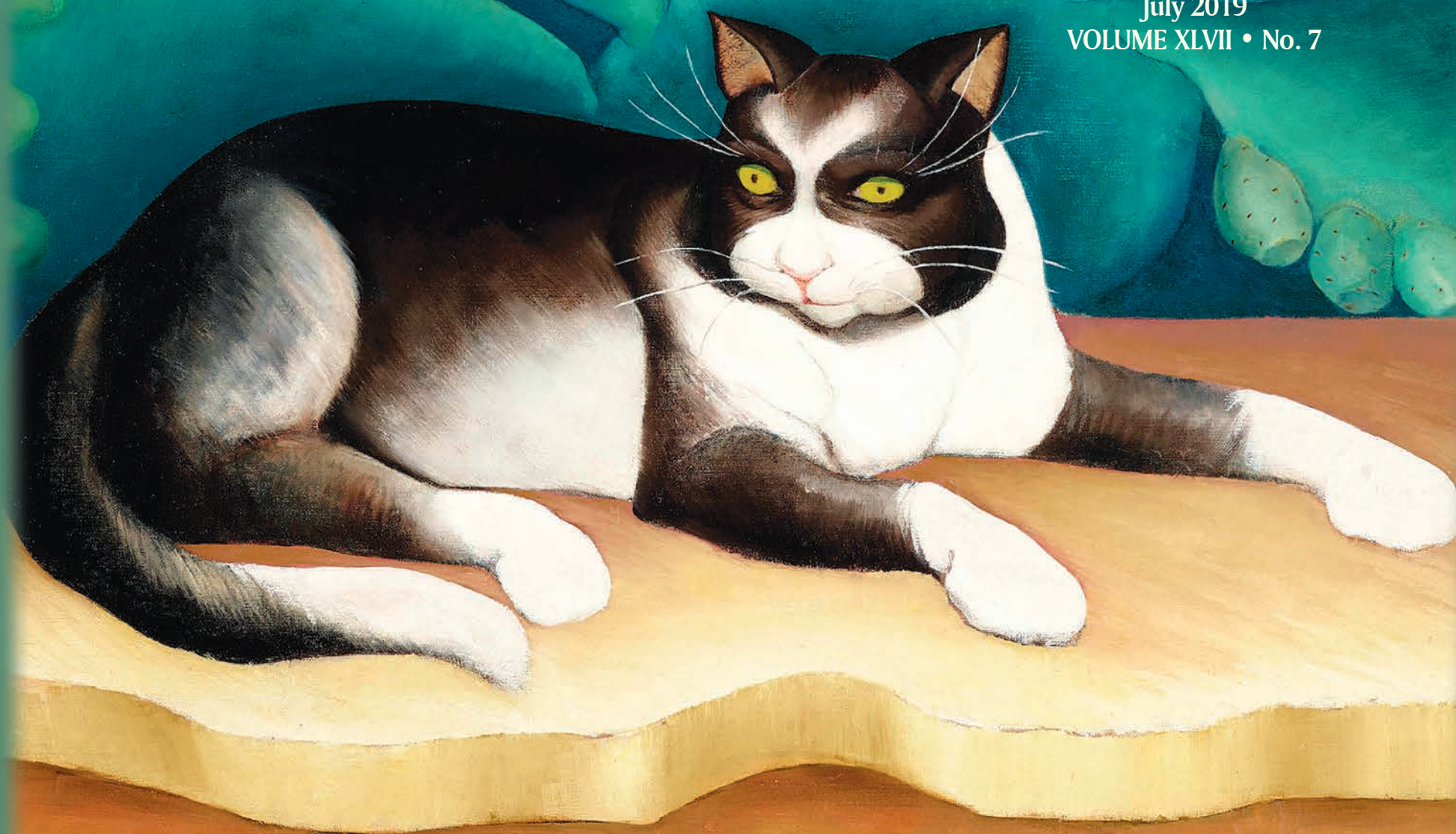


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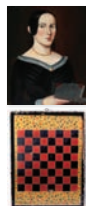
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# Winterthur Acquires a Landscape by Duncanson



Robert S. Duncanson (1821-1872), *Short Mountain, Hawkins County, Tennessee, circa 1852*. Photo courtesy Winterthur.

by Lita Solis-Cohen

Museums are making up for the fact that African American artists have rarely made it into the mainstream of art history by making an effort to tell a more inclusive story. Winterthur is the latest to announce an important acquisition to this end. It has acquired a major oil painting by Robert S. Duncanson (1821-1872), whom the museum describes as “the foremost African American landscape painter of the 19th century.”

*Short Mountain, Hawkins County, Tennessee*, a panoramic view with a stream, pasture, and mountains in Tennessee, is the latest addition to the Winterthur collection. The museum aims to present a more inclusive view of American material culture and to offer more opportunities for teaching.

In addition to the Duncanson landscape, Winterthur has three pieces of needlework stitched by schoolgirls of color, a circa 1840 dressing bureau made by North Carolina cabinetmaker Thomas Day that was purchased in 2016, and a portrait of a member of the Moale/Russell family attributed to Joshua Johnson, a gift from Stiles Colwill in 2016.

Like Joshua Johnson, Duncanson was an artist of mixed race. His father was a free black tradesman in Seneca County, New York, a descendant of a former slave from Virginia. When his family moved to Monroe, Michigan, Robert, like his brothers, worked as a house painter, and later he became a portrait painter. He moved to Cincinnati and then to Detroit, where he became a genre painter, and then he turned to landscape painting, traveling to make sketches that he turned into finished paintings in his studio. In time he was acclaimed by antebellum critics as the “best landscape painter in the West,” said Dr. Stéphanie Delamaire, Winterthur’s associate curator of fine art, in a prepared statement, adding, “*Short Mountain*, an outstanding composition in pristine condition for its age, equals or surpasses many examples of the mid-nineteenth-century American school of landscape painting.... If you want to study Duncanson as a painter, you want to see this picture.”

Winterthur bought the painting from New York City dealer Debra Force, who advertised it in *The Magazine Antiques* and was contacted by Winterthur. Force said it was once owned by Clement Drew (1806-1889), a Boston marine artist and frame maker who owned an art supply store. “Drew was an abolitionist,” said Force. “It descended in his family until the year 2000, when it was bought by the collector who consigned it for sale.”

Force said it is listed in the Duncanson catalogue raisonné compiled by Joseph D. Ketner II, who identified a stamp on the back of the canvas that indicates the canvas was bought by Duncanson between 1850 and 1853 in Troy, New York, when he was traveling in that area. Force said that the view Duncanson painted in Tennessee

is identifiable and documented by photographs, making it more desirable than unidentified places.

There has not been a lot of material by African Americans available for Winterthur, with its focus on American decorative arts and paintings made before 1850, to buy. An African American cabinetmaker entered the history of American furniture in 1987 when Beatrice Garvan exhibited a chaste, well-proportioned mahogany chest-on-chest by Thomas Gross in *Federal Philadelphia 1785-1825: The Athens of the Western World* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and pictured it in the accompanying catalog. She identified Gross as a “person of colour” listed in Philadelphia directories and suggested that he learned his trade from his father, a carpenter working on South Sixth Street in 1804. The chest-on-chest has remained on view in the museum’s American decorative arts galleries ever since.

In 2012 the work of Milton, North Carolina, cabinetmaker Thomas Day was celebrated in a traveling exhibition that made its way to the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C. Day’s work was first published by Jonathan Prown in the *Winterthur Portfolio* in 1998, suggesting that African American craftsmen have been a subject of academic study for only a generation.

Painters of color have fared somewhat better than cabinetmakers, although Joshua Johnson Jr. (1763-1824), a Baltimore portrait painter, known since the 1930s, was not identified as an artist of color until Stiles Colwill and his staff at the Maryland Historical Society and Carolyn Weekley at the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center published *Joshua Johnson: Freeman and Early American Portrait Painter* (1987) with a traveling exhibition in 1988. Johnson has been called the first African American to make a living as an artist.

In his blog in March, dealer Reagan Upshaw noted that Robert Duncanson and Edmonia Lewis (1844-1907), the first African American woman to achieve fame as a sculptor, were both living north of the Mason-Dixon line and were aided by abolitionist patrons. As a result they were able to achieve significant reputations in their lifetimes. Lewis eventually found that living in Europe “afforded her a much more congenial way of life,” as did Philadelphian African American painter Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937), whose works have been exhibited in museums since the 1970s, and who was the subject of a traveling exhibition in 1991 organized by the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

*Short Mountain* by Robert Duncanson will be not on view at Winterthur until December. A special study day, “Discovering Duncanson,” will be held on December 6, featuring prominent scholars Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, Ph.D., of the National Portrait Gallery, and Martha Jones, Ph.D., of Johns Hopkins University.

Registration for the study day will begin on September 6 on Winterthur’s website ([www.winterthur.org](http://www.winterthur.org)).

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