



This masterfully executed and painstakingly detailed drawing by Asher B. Durand (1796-1886) was created when the artist had long since been retired from professional life and was in his 84th year. The hatching technique used to produce the illusion of depth and shadows reveals both the artist's skill as a draftsman and his earlier training in engraving. Durand was an influential member of the Hudson River School, a loose association of like-minded American landscape painters who tried to capture the "sublime" essence of nature through their artwork. He is also associated with the Luminist movement, an offshoot of the Hudson River School that particularly sought to

portray nature as a manifestation of Divine Providence.¹ This philosophy was elaborated upon in a series of articles Durand wrote entitled “Letters on Landscape Painting” for *Crayon* magazine in 1855 and 1866. In the “Letters” he writes that “(a painting) will be great in proportion as it declares the glory of God by a representation of his works, and not the works of man.”²

Though he had traveled extensively abroad and was familiar with the work of his European counterparts there is a distinctly American presence in Durand’s work. The Hudson River artists glorified the solemn beauty of the American landscape and when the human figure did appear in their work it tended to be downplayed as part, rather than the central element, of the landscape. In *Tree with Foliage* one sees more than a mere study. The drawing is a portrait of a tree that must be imagined to be as accurate as Durand’s extensive skills were capable of rendering it. Here is an attempt to express a profundity in nature that goes beyond the representation of a singular tree that the artist might have found to be aesthetically pleasing. Durand believed that every tree has an individual quality that is satiated with meaning³, and that there is a particular truth to be found in nature that is fundamental to the understanding of the sublime.

Though Durand and his contemporaries believed in the discipline of extensive preliminary drawings in preparation for a painting, *Tree with Foliage* certainly stands on its own as a finished work of art. Executed in the New York City area where he had retired, this drawing would have been created at a point in the artist’s life when he was producing few paintings. Yet despite his advanced age it is clear that Durand’s skills as a draftsman

¹ John Wilmerding, *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850-1875* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1980), 31.

² *ibid*, 31.

³ *ibid*, 107.

were still extremely keen. *Tree with Foliage* is unusually finished for a typical Hudson River School drawing. It was more common for these artists to concentrate on focal points and certain details while leaving the majority of the drawing in outline or quickly indicated. A considerable number of landscape drawings from this period have fortunately survived suggesting that pencil studies of nature were of particular importance to the artist of this time. This is supported by an essay in *Crayon* magazine published in 1856 calling for elementary drawing to be a part of the typical American education.⁴

In an 1855 edition of his “Letters on Landscape Painting” Durand expounded upon his views of drawing by writing,

Form is the first subject to engage your attention. Take pencil and paper, not the palette and brushes, and draw with scrupulous fidelity the outline or contour of such objects as you shall select, and, so far as your judgment goes, choose the most beautiful or characteristic of its kind. If your subject be a tree, observe particularly wherein it differs from those of other species; in the first place, the termination of its foliage, best seen when relieved on the sky, whether pointed or rounded, drooping or springing upward, etc., etc.; next mark the character of its trunk and branches, the manner in which the latter shoot off from the parent stem, their direction, curves, and angles. Every kind of tree has its traits of individuality—some kinds assimilate, others differ widely—with careful attention, these peculiarities are easily learned, and so, in a greater or less degree, with all other objects. By this course you will also obtain the knowledge of that natural variety of form, so essential to protect you against frequent repetition and monotony. A moment’s reflection will convince you of the vital importance of drawing, and the continual demand for its exercise in the practice of outline, before you begin to paint....The external appearance of this our dwelling-place, apart from its wondrous structure and functions that minister to our well-being, is fraught with lessons of high and holy meaning.⁵

⁴ *ibid*, 243.

⁵ Allison Malafronte, *En Plein Air: Letters On Landscape Painting*, 2009 [Online] Available from <http://forums.myamericanartist.com/blogs/pleinair/archive /2009/01/07/en-plein-air-letters-on-landscape-painting.aspx>. 26 September 2009.

With this quote one can see how fundamental and profound Durand believed drawing to be.

Successful in his own time, Durand was elected to the presidency of the National Academy of Design, a position he held for 17 years. He was known to be of a gregarious nature as attested to by surviving letters from friends such as Thomas Cole and the artist's obituary in the *New York Times* that said he would be remembered for his kindheartedness and generosity. Durand's early engravings were extremely popular as were his later portraits but it is his landscape paintings that he is most remembered for. *Tree with Foliage* depicts an individual tree that the artist has managed to imbue with a distinct personality. It fills the entire picture plane with its volume. Durand's philosophy concerning the Providence of nature motivated him to create landscapes that manage to translate his personal sense of the sublime to the viewer. The confidence and skill of the elderly artist's hand are apparent in *Tree with Foliage*. Here is a profound example of the awe of nature translated into two dimensions by a master draftsman and influential aesthete.

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