

J.P BALL AND ROBERT DUNCANSON: AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARTISTIC COLLABORATION

This installation highlights the collaboration between photographer James Presley (J. P.) Ball (1825–1904) and landscape painter Robert Seldon Duncanson (1821/22–1872). Ball was one of few Black photographers working in the early years of the medium, invented in 1839. After learning the process of making daguerreotypes from another African American photographer, John B. Bailey, at the resort town of White Sulphur Springs, Virginia (today West Virginia), Ball began his career as a traveling photographer. He spent most of his career in Cincinnati, Ohio, where his practice was highly regarded.

Duncanson, also based in Cincinnati, was one of the most accomplished landscape painters in the region. After working initially as a housepainter, Duncanson, like Ball, moved from place to place before he established a reputation in Cincinnati. He traveled extensively in the United States, Canada, and Europe during his career to sketch, study, and exhibit his work. Both men experienced great success despite the challenges they faced as African American artists in the mid-nineteenth century.

Ball and Duncanson collaborated from roughly 1845 to 1855 on various endeavors. Ball employed Duncanson in his studio and exhibited his work there. In this alcove, their respective works appear side by side as they did in Ball's "Great Daguerrian Gallery of the West" on Fourth Street in Cincinnati around 1854. Duncanson is also believed to have been the painter of a 600-yard-long panorama (now lost) that illustrated the episodes described in Ball's 1855 abolitionist pamphlet *Splendid Mammoth Pictorial Tour of the United States*. The painting and pamphlet narrated horrific stories of kidnappings in Africa and enslavement in the United States. In addition to their antislavery efforts, Ball and Duncanson received significant support from abolitionist patrons.

Kelly M. Williams, chair of the Smithsonian American Art Museum Commission (2021–23) and noted collector of African American art, made a generous gift to support the reimagining and reinstallation of the permanent collection galleries in honor of Commissioner Dr. Deborah Willis. Her gift honors Dr. Willis's extraordinary contributions to the field of American photography. Dr. Willis is an esteemed artist, historian, and chair of the Department of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University.

Early Photography Processes on View

During his long career, spanning 1845 to 1904, J. P. Ball made many different types of photographs, including:

Daguerreotypes

- Earliest form of photography; invented in France in 1839
- Single image captured on a silver-coated copper plate
- Fragile, mirrorlike photograph placed in a decorative case

Tintypes

- Invented in the 1850s
- Single image fixed on an iron surface (not tin, despite the name)
- More durable than daguerreotypes; typically protected by a layer of varnish

Albumen silver prints

- Invented in 1850
- Most common photographic format in the nineteenth century
- Image made by pressing a glass negative against a sheet of paper coated in albumen (egg whites)
- Reproducible: many prints could be made from one glass negative

Cartes de visite

- Type of albumen print; popular in the 1860s
- Small, affordable “visiting cards” exchanged among friends and family
- Created in cameras that could capture multiple negatives on a single, whole glass plate, multiplying the number of images generated from a single visit to the photographer’s studio
- Cartes of loved ones and celebrities collected in personal photo albums

Cabinet cards

- Type of albumen print; popular in the late nineteenth century
- Twice as large as cartes de visite
- Intended for display on one’s shelf or table instead of in an album

Object labels



1.

J.P. Ball

Unidentified sitters

1853–58

half plate daguerreotype; cased

The refined nature of this family’s self-presentation, especially the silk dress and the jewelry worn by the mother, shows the wealth of James Presley Ball’s early clientele. Although Ball photographed Black clients, including the famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass, the photographs in this installation reflect how often white families and individuals in Cincinnati patronized Ball.

This type of photograph is a daguerreotype, the earliest form of photography. While daguerreotypes were more affordable than painted portraits, they were not as accessible to all classes as later, less expensive forms of photography.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The L. J. West Collection of Early African American Photography, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

(J.P. Ball 1)

[NOTE: The following items are in the same case:]



J.P. Ball

Unidentified sitter

1858–60

ninth plate daguerreotype with applied color; half-cased

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The L. J. West Collection of Early African American Photography, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

(J.P. Ball 2)

Unidentified sitters

1858–60

quarter-plate daguerreotype; cased

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The L. J. West Collection of Early African American Photography, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

(J.P. Ball 3)

Unidentified sitter

ca. 1858

albumen silver print with applied color; cased

Two of these encased photographs feature hand-tinting, in which a colorist added hues to the otherwise black-and-white photographs to enhance their lifelike qualities. A person identified with the signature “Miller” added the skin and hair coloring of the man with the beard. It is very possible that the artist responsible for the blue tint of the girl’s garment was painter Robert S. Duncanson. He worked in Ball’s studio as a colorist from about 1854 to 1858.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program

(J.P. Ball 4)

[NOTE: The following items are in the same case:]



J. P. Ball, Alexander Thomas

Unidentified sitter

1855–60

carte de visite

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Dr. Robert L. Drapkin Collection, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

(Ball_Thomas 1)

Unidentified sitter

1855–60

carte de visite

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Dr. Robert L. Drapkin Collection, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

(Ball_Thomas 2)

Unidentified sitter

1855–60

carte de visite

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Dr. Robert L. Drapkin Collection, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

(Ball_Thomas 3)

Unidentified sitter

1856–57

carte de visite

The women and children featured within these small photographs, called cartes de visite, pose in noticeably different interior settings. J. P. Ball and his brother-in-law, Alexander Thomas, who produced these four photographs, operated at least five different studios in their thirteen-year partnership. Stamps from two of these studios—one marked “120 W. Fourth Street, near Race,” the other “30 Fourth Street, near Walnut”—appear on the back sides of the cards.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The L. J. West Collection of Early African American Photography, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment

(Ball_Thomas 4)

[NOTE: The two labels are in the same case:]



William J. Pierce, copy after Wade

Ball's Great Daguerrian Gallery of the West, from Gleason's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion

April 1, 1854

wood engraving on paper

This illustration shows the interior of Ball's “Great Daguerrian Gallery of the West,” which included separate rooms for taking and processing photographs and an exhibition space that displayed Ball's photographs and Duncanson's landscape paintings for the public.

In addition to his role hand-tinting photographs within Ball's studio, Duncanson may have painted decorations on the gallery's walls and ceilings. In April 1854, *Gleason's Pictorial Magazine* promoted Ball's business to a national audience. The story and illustration were reproduced in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* the following month, advertising the gallery to African American and abolitionist readers.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The L. J. West Collection of Early African American Photography, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment



J. P. Ball & Son

Unidentified sitter

1887–94

cabinet card

After leaving Cincinnati in the early 1870s, Ball worked his way across the country, spending time in cities across the South and the West. In 1887 he moved to Helena, Montana, where he operated a studio with his son and took this larger-scale printed photograph called a cabinet card. Later in his career, Ball photographed a wide range of subjects, including civic and social groups and recent immigrants. The photographer died in Hawai'i in 1904 at the age of seventy-nine.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, The L. J. West Collection of Early African American Photography, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment



Robert S. Duncanson

Mount Healthy, Ohio

1844

oil on canvas

This view of an Ohio estate is Duncanson's first known landscape painting made when he was in his early twenties. Its flatness is characteristic of the decorative furniture and house painting in which the artist was trained by his father and grandfather. Duncanson moved to the town of Mount Healthy, Ohio, around 1840. Both Mount Healthy and nearby Cincinnati, seen at the composition's far left, had established free Black communities and networks of abolitionist supporters who fostered Duncanson's budding career.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Leonard Granoff, 1983.95.159



Robert S. Duncanson

Landscape with Rainbow

1859

oil on canvas

Duncanson included several abolitionist references in this pastoral landscape painted on the eve of the Civil War. A young couple walks toward a house nestled in the trees. The rainbow overhead falls directly onto the roof, possibly a reference to safe houses to which enslaved people fled while seeking freedom. The stream reminds us of the division between free states and slave states, but waterways also helped escapees on their path to freedom, as water erased footprints and masked human scent. Duncanson's dog, like those of the slave hunters, is thrown off the scent by water and faces the opposite direction of the safe house in plain sight.

This scene is filled with hope. *Landscape with Rainbow* is an example of the power of landscape painting to convey America's aspirations. It is a vision of future peace and prosperity.

Landscape with Rainbow was on display at the US Capitol as part of the inaugural events that took place on January 20, 2021. First Lady Dr. Jill Biden and Senator Roy Blunt selected the painting to reflect the theme of the inaugural ceremonies: "Our Determined Democracy: Forging a More Perfect Union."

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Leonard and Paula Granoff, 1983.95.160



Robert Seldon Duncanson

Waterfall on Mont-Morency

1864

oil on canvas

From 1863 to 1865, Duncanson lived in Montreal, Canada, where he escaped the tumult of the US Civil War and enjoyed a warm reception among the city’s artistic community. He used William Notman’s photograph of Montmorency Falls, outside Quebec City, as the basis for this composition. Duncanson added a small rainbow at the base of the falls, a symbol of promise after a storm. The rainbow may gesture to the freedom he and others of African descent experienced in Canada, where slavery had been abolished since 1834 and where many who had self-emancipated in the United States sought safety. This imagery recalls the words of African American abolitionist and poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, who in 1856 wrote:

“Niagara, the great, the glorious Niagara, may hush your spirit with its ceaseless thunder; it may charm you with its robe of crested spray and rainbow crown; but the land of Freedom was a lesson of deeper significance than foaming waves or towering mountains.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Dr. Norbert Fleisig, 1983.95.161