

## ***Subject Matter and Visual Analysis***

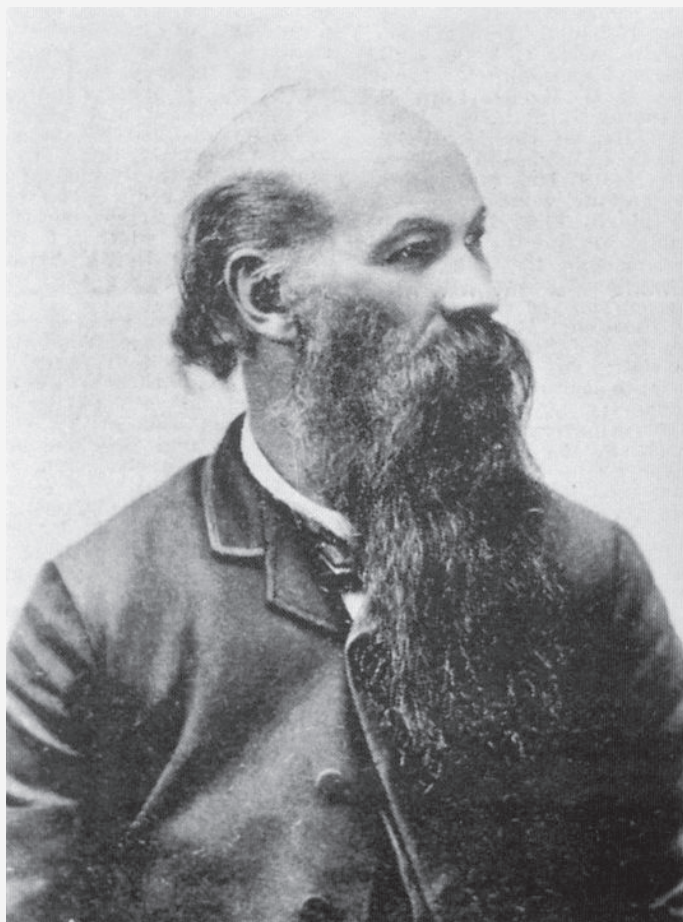
The foreground of Duncanson's *View of Cincinnati, Ohio from Covington, Kentucky* is a bucolic, rural scene featuring African-American farmers in Covington, Kentucky. In the background, on the far bank of the river, the viewer can see the industrialized skyline of Cincinnati, which is dotted with factory buildings and smokestacks. The verticality of the prominent trees on the left and right sides of the composition serves to help frame the scene and focus attention on the small figures in the middle foreground. Duncanson based his composition on an engraving of a daguerreotype of the scene that had appeared in *Graham's Magazine* in June of 1848.<sup>163</sup>

The artist made the decision to change the race of the figures in the engraving from white to Black. Duncanson did not address racism explicitly, but it is the subtext of several of his landscapes. At the time, Covington's population included a hundred enslaved people, fifty free African Americans, and about fifteen thousand whites. The Ohio River separated the rural, slave-owning state of Kentucky from the more industrialized, Northern state of Ohio, where slavery had been banned since 1802. The Underground Railroad was active in Cincinnati, due to its proximity to a slave-owning state. In the winter, when the Ohio River froze, African Americans would attempt to flee Kentucky by crossing the river on foot from Covington. Therefore, rivers in Duncanson's landscapes are often associated with freedom and escape.

The Ohio River would also feature prominently in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe herself lived in Cincinnati in the 1840s, and she included a scene in the book where Eliza, an enslaved woman from Kentucky, crosses the icy Ohio River with her infant daughter, moving from ice floe to ice floe in search of freedom. Duncanson was certainly familiar with Stowe's novel. Two years after he painted *View of Cincinnati*, Duncanson painted a scene featuring characters from Stowe's book called [\*Uncle Tom and Little Eva\*](#). Like *View of Cincinnati*, the composition features a river in the background.

## ***Situating Duncanson within the American Landscape Tradition***

The Ohio River Valley style is considered a second-generation school of landscape painting, inspired by the Hudson River School, which had been founded in the Catskills region of New York by the influential landscape painter Thomas Cole and his followers, including Asher B. Durand and Frederick Church. The Hudson River School was not a literal school; rather, the term refers to a movement of like-minded artists who often painted in New York's Hudson River Valley. In 1847, Benjamin McConkey, who was one of Cole's students, exhibited Cole's [\*Voyage of Life\*](#) series in Cincinnati.<sup>164</sup> This marked a turning point when Duncanson and his colleagues Whittredge and Sonntag turned their attention from portraits to landscape painting. The three artists embarked on a series of sketching tours, traveling together in search of inspiring views. A European tour in 1853 provided further inspiration.



*Photograph of James Presley Ball (1825–1904), a prominent African-American photographer who was based in Cincinnati and worked with Robert S. Duncanson.*