

Release Date: February 3, 2012

## Rare Still Life is First Work by 19th-Century African American Artist Robert Seldon Duncanson to Enter Collection of National Gallery of Art; on View Beginning February 3, 2012



Robert Seldon Duncanson (American, 1821-1872)

*Still Life with Fruit and Nuts*, 1848

oil on board, 12 x 16 in.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Ann and Mark Kington/The Kington Foundation and the Avalon Fund

WASHINGTON, DC—The National Gallery of Art has acquired one of fewer than a dozen known still lifes painted in the late 1840s by African American artist Robert Seldon Duncanson (1821–1872). Classically composed, ***Still Life with Fruit and Nuts*** (1848) depicts fruit arranged in a tabletop pyramid in which the smooth surfaces of beautifully rendered fruit contrast with textured nutshells. The acquisition was made possible with funds from Ann and Mark Kington/The Kington Foundation and the Avalon Fund.

"The National Gallery of Art has long been seeking works by Duncanson, and we were very pleased to learn of this painting, which is a particularly fine example of his work in this genre," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We continue to look

for an outstanding example of the landscape paintings for which Duncanson was widely recognized during his lifetime."

Measuring just 12 x 16 inches, *Still Life with Fruit and Nuts* is on view in an intimate room (Gallery M-69A) of the American collection alongside other still-life works by such American artists as Joseph Decker, William Michael Harnett, Martin Johnson Heade, James Peale, Raphaelle Peale, and John Frederick Peto. Like Duncanson's other still lifes, it is spare and meticulously painted, reflecting the tradition of American still-life painting initiated by Charles Willson Peale and his gifted children—particularly Raphaelle and Rembrandt Peale.

Self-taught and living in Cincinnati when he created his still-life paintings, Duncanson exhibited several of them at the annual Michigan State Fair. During one such exhibition, a critic for the *Detroit Free Press* wrote, "the paintings of fruit, etc. by Duncanson are beautiful, and as they deserve, have elicited universal admiration." The artist's turn from still-life subjects to landscapes conveying religious and moral messages may have been inspired by the exhibition in Cincinnati of Thomas Cole's celebrated series *The Voyage of Life* (1842). Cole's allegorical paintings were purchased by a private collector in Cincinnati and remained in the city until acquired by the National Gallery of Art in 1971. Exposure to Cole's paintings marked a turning point in Duncanson's career. Soon he began creating landscapes that incorporated signature elements from Cole and often carried moral messages. Visitors can also see *The Voyage of Life* in the American galleries, not far from Duncanson's painting.

Following the outbreak of the Civil War, Duncanson traveled to Canada, where he remained until departing for Europe in 1865. Often described as the first African American artist to achieve an international reputation, Duncanson enjoyed considerable success exhibiting his landscapes abroad. His achievement as a still-life painter has only recently garnered attention. The exceptional quality of *Still Life with Fruit and Nuts* suggests that much remains to be learned about this little-known aspect of his career.

The Gallery's collection of American art includes nearly 400 works by African American artists, including paintings, works on paper, and sculpture ranging from a colonial portrait by Joshua Johnson of Baltimore, to photographs by Roy DeCarava and James

VanDerZee, to modern and contemporary works by Romare Bearden, Willie Cole, Sam Gilliam, Barkley Leonard Hendricks, William H. Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Glenn Ligon, Julie Mehretu, Horace Pippin, Martin Puryear, Lorna Simpson, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Alma Thomas, and Kara Walker. In 2011 the Gallery acquired the large-scale canvas *Great America* (1994) by Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955), which is currently on view in the East Building concourse galleries.

###

## General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets along Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. With the exception of the atrium and library, the galleries in the East Building will be closing gradually beginning in July 2013 and will remain closed for approximately three years for Master Facilities Plan and renovations. For specific updates on gallery closings, visit [www.nga.gov/renovation](http://www.nga.gov/renovation) (<http://www.nga.gov/renovation>) .

For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's website at [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov). Follow the Gallery on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt](http://www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt) and on Twitter at [twitter.com/ngadc](http://twitter.com/ngadc).

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

Press Office

National Gallery of Art

2000B South Club Drive

Landover, MD 20785

phone: (202) 842-6353 e-mail: [pressinfo@nga.gov](mailto:pressinfo@nga.gov)

Deborah Ziska

Chief of Press and Public Information

(202) 842-6353

ds-ziska@nga.gov