APG 21450D
ASHER B. DURAND (American, 1796–1886)
Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York, about 1848
Oil on canvas, 19 x 21 1/2 in.

EX COLL.: the artist; to his friend, sculptor Henry Kirke Brown (1814–1886); by descent to his nephew and adopted son, Henry Kirke Bush-Brown (1857–1935); by descent to his son, James Bush-Brown (1892–1985); by descent, to his son, Albert Bush-Brown (1926–1994); and by descent in the family to the present

In 1848, as the American art community reeled from the unexpected and untimely death of Thomas Cole on February 8 (he died of pleurisy after a five-day illness), William Cullen Bryant wrote in the *New York Post*. "We prize ... [Durand] the more, now that since Cole has departed he is left alone, at the head of American Landscape art" (as quoted in Linda Ferber, ed., *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape*, exhib. cat. [Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum, 2007, p. 158). Durand was a central figure in the cultural life of New York City, a link between the early nineteenth-century Knickerbocker world of William Dunlap and John Trumbull and the vastly different society that would emerge after the Civil War. As a young artist-engraver in 1825, it was Durand, in company with John Trumbull and William Dunlap, who first purchased the work of then-unknown Thomas Cole. In that same year Durand was invited to join James Fenimore Cooper's Bread and Cheese Club, which became the Sketch Club in 1827, and, in 1847, the Century Association, of which he was a founding member. From 1845 until 1861 Durand served as President of the prestigious National Academy of Design. (For the most comprehensive and accessible discussion of Durand, see Ferber. The work of David B Lawall, including his 1966 doctoral dissertation, *Asher B. Durand, His Art and Art Theory in Relation to his Times* [New York: Garland Publishing Co., 1977], remains indispensable.)

In 1848, Durand was at the height of his career, the dean of American landscape painters and the President of the National Academy of Design. In April 1848, he sent a large oil landscape, *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, N.Y.* to the annual exhibition of the National Academy. Shortly thereafter, Durand sold the painting to the American Art-Union, where, in its annual end-of-the-year lottery, it was won by a subscriber in Mobile, Alabama. By 1850, the picture belonged to Daniel Seymour, a former manager of the Art-Union, and a well-to-do paper merchant who was a neighbor of Durand's

on Amity Street in Manhattan (now West Third Street in Greenwich Village) and a fellow founding member of the Century Association. It is most likely that the painting never traveled South, since it was not unusual for wealthy New Yorkers to purchase Art-Union prizes from distant lottery winners who might well prefer a financial windfall to a work of art. Seymour arranged for John Smillie to engrave Durand's picture for national distribution to Art-Union subscribers. Suitable for framing, the engraving found its way to widely dispersed homes across America (and sometimes even farther), becoming a staple image of mid-nineteenth-century America and, for its owners, a marker of cultural aspiration. The present painting, similarly titled, is a variant, much reduced in size, of the large painting, one of two presently known smaller views of the scene. All three differ slightly in detail and perspective. (For a reference to the other known view, see, David B. Lawall, *Asher B. Durand: A*

Documentary Catalogue of the Narrative and Landscape Paintings [New York: Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1978,] p. 184 no. 388, fig 231 illus.). Additionally, a topographical pencil sketch of the scene is in the collection of the New York Historical Society (Ferber, p. 157 fig. 57 illus.). The large painting is now in the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The present work has descended in the family of Henry Kirke Brown, who acquired it from this close friend Durand.

Asher Brown Durand was born in Jefferson Village (now Maplewood), New Jersey, to a family of Dutch and Huguenot origin. His father was a farmer as well as an artisan, a watchmaker, and silversmith who encouraged three of his sons, Cyrus, Asher, and John, to pursue careers as engravers. Accordingly, in 1812, Asher Durand was apprenticed to Newark engraver Peter Maverick. His aptitude was such that by 1817 he was Maverick's partner, dispatched to open a New York City branch of the firm. In 1820, John Trumbull, the eminent history painter and President of the American Academy in New York, commissioned the twenty-three-year-old Durand to engrave Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence*. (The original is at the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.) The partnership with Maverick foundered, probably over business tensions related to Durand's acceptance of the Trumbull assignment. The engraving, published in 1823, established Durand's professional reputation, and propelled him from the realm of commercial engraving toward the world of art.

Durand joined with his brother Cyrus in New York in a family engraving firm, A. B. and C. Durand, from 1824 to 1831. While Cyrus developed a solid business as a commercial and bank-note engraver, Asher moved steadily toward a career as a painter. He entered vigorously into the art life of New York City. In 1825, he was among the founders of the New-York Drawing Association; in 1827 he was a founding member of the artist-initiated and controlled National Academy of Design. Durand's early art pursuit reached its peak with his 1835 engraving of John Vanderlyn's *Ariadne Asleep on the Isle of Naxos*. (The original, painted 1812–14, is in the collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia). By that time, however, he was ready to give up engraving and commit himself to a career as a painter. From the time of his arrival in New York City, Durand had taught himself to paint. He was an auto didact, disciplining himself with a standard practice of making an oil copy of the original painting he was being paid to translate to line before embarking on the engraving process. He began his fine-art career as a portraitist, adding history and genre to his repertoire as he gained skill and confidence.

In 1834 Durand was one of four beneficiaries of the patronage of Luman Reed, a prosperous New York wholesale grocer who had begun to collect art and decided, in the mid-1830s, to concentrate his efforts in support of contemporary New York artists. Together with Thomas Cole, George Whiting Flagg, and William Sidney Mount, Durand painted commissioned works for Reed. Durand contributed a group of presidential portraits to Reed's collection and then embarked on a series of genre scenes

that decorated the walls of Reed's substantial Greenwich Street home. The top floor of Reed's house had been designed as an art gallery that the civic-minded merchant opened to the public one day a week. After Reed's premature death from cholera in 1836, his business partner and son-in-law, Jonathan Sturges, continued to sponsor Durand. In 1840, Sturges financed Durand's trip to Europe in company with John Casilear, John Frederick Kensett, and Thomas B. Rossiter. Durand arrived in Europe in June and remained until June 1841, touring England, France, the Low Countries, Germany, and Switzerland, and settling in Italy before returning through Switzerland, France, and England. The year-long tour was a deliberate and dedicated exposure to the artistic heritage and current practice of Western Europe.

On his return, though Durand still listed himself in directories as a portrait painter, he had decided that he wanted to focus his talent on landscape painting. He had spent the summer of 1837 sketching with Thomas Cole at Schroon Lake in the Adirondack Mountains. As travels so often does, Durand's European experience served to clarify his thought. Away from home, he realized that the landscape scenery of his native land presented a beckoning opportunity: to express in painting the as-yet unexplored potential inherent in the American landscape for the expression of spiritual values through association with natural forms. He adapted from Claude Lorrain's artistic language a suitable framework for his peaceful, Arcadian paintings of the scenery of the northeastern United States, which embodied his belief in the presence of divinity in nature. In this he followed Cole, whose landscapes were often freighted with lofty religious sentiments. Together the two artists brought landscape to the forefront of American art, producing a body of work that became the foundation of the Hudson River School. Cole and Durand, friends and rivals, ultimately pursued diverse paths in their approach to landscape. Cole's early work had celebrated the pristine nature of the American wilderness. After his first trip to Europe from 1829 to 1832, Cole increasingly turned to composed landscapes, often didactic and frequently incorporating references to the ancient ruins he had visited in Europe. Durand's work of the 1840s and 1850s, in contrast, portrayed man and nature in peaceful coexistence, with an emphasis on observed nature, reflecting the influence of the "truth to nature" ideology of the English art critic, John Ruskin (1819–1900).

As Durand garnered critical and popular success during the 1840s, he assumed an increasingly prominent role among New York artists. In 1845, he succeeded the long-time leader, Samuel F. B. Morse, as President of the National Academy, a post he held until 1861. From January to June 1855, Durand published a patriarchal series of reflections, "Letters on Landscape Painting." (The full text of the letters appears in an Appendix in Ferber, pp. 231–52.) The series appeared in The *Crayon*, an American Ruskinian art journal edited by John Durand, the artist's son. Using an epistolary form and addressed to a young artist seeking instruction in landscape painting, Durand went into detail on technical issues involving drawing and color. As importantly, he explicated the philosophical underpinnings for a serious school of American landscape painting. Through the 1840s, Durand's own work had subtly moved from Lorrain-inspired canvases with an underlying assumption of divine order

and geometry, to a more specific, detailed examination of nature that reflected his acute awareness of the beauty of nature's complexities and irregularities. The later style reflected the influence of Ruskin, while it established Durand as a pioneer of *plein-air* painting in America.

The large work, *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York* is a harbinger of the approach to landscape painting that Durand fully articulated in 1855, and thus a landmark on the road to the triumph of the American school of landscape painting as it reached its zenith in the years before the Civil War. The Dover Plains paintings can be parsed to find point-by-point correspondences between passages of the paintings and the arguments and technical information Durand detailed in his "Letters."

In broad outline, in the "Letters" Durand directs the young artist that first, he (the assumed gender of the reader) must go to nature and learn from nature how to draw because, quite simply, the forms that exist in nature are the embodiment of God's presence on earth. Durand suggests, in Letter III, that the artist "proceed ..., choosing the more simple foreground objects—a fragment of rock, or trunk of a tree: choose them when distinctly marked by strong light and shade" (as quoted in Ferber, p. 236). The challenge to the artist is not to imitate nature, but to represent the beauty and subtlety of what the eye sees through the use of a variety of technical strategies. Durand offers a detailed discussion of how to achieve the perceptual effects of distance through what he calls "atmospheric gradation." Emphasizing the importance of sunshine, "the joyous expression of Nature, the lovely smile that lights up all her beauty, so changing and adorning all it rests upon as to seem itself creative," Durand launches into his discussion of color. The Letter ends with a footnote directing the student to "*See Goethe on Color*" (Letter VI, pp. 242, 244, italics in original).

As Durand approaches the end of his Letters, he offers cautions to the artist that stand out, in retrospect, as markers between traditional views of art and what would eventually become modern art. Strikingly, Durand says that the purpose of technical mastery is "the concealment of the means by which the desired effect is attained." That is to say, the viewer is not supposed to be aware of the virtuoso skill of the artist, what he calls "studied artifice or imbecile attempts to supply imaginary deficiencies in the pictorial imagery of Nature." The artist adds creativity and imagination to his project by choosing "the time and place where she [Nature] displays her chief perfections, whether of beauty or majesty, repose or action." There is nothing "fitting the aim of Art, that is not to be seen in Nature, more beautiful and more fitting than Art has ever realized or ever can" (Letter VII, pp. 246–47). Durand argues against the commonplace advice that sends young artists to look at art as a guide to making art. First, last, and always look to Nature. Realism, says Durand, is not a counterpoint to idealism, but a way station, a preliminary point on the continuum striving for the ideal. "The ideal is, in fact, nothing more than the perfection of the real." He lauds Claude Lorrain for his "out-door studiousness," working "from morning till nightfall," and applauds Joseph Mallord William Turner toiling "at all hours, under the open sky *washing in* his memoranda of the flitting effects which display his imaginative power and versatile invention!" (Letter VIII, p. 250, italics in original). Finally, the

imaginative genius of the artist lies in “revealing the deep meaning of the real creation around and within us.” While the imaginative artist has the freedom to observe all of nature to find that which is most beautiful, for Durand, “the reverent imagination ceases to exult in its own conscious power to change and recreate, while it contemplates the great miracle of God’s creation” (Letter IX, p. 252).

In his Letters, Durand spoke from head and heart, reflecting his own experience and deeply felt belief. Durand himself had had no formal academic art training, but had literally studied art, in the sense of making good use of all the information and influences he encountered or sought out. In the “Letters” his assumed reader audience was as he had been himself: a young, aspiring artist lacking access to organized instruction. Durand advised against "the pursuit of art for the sake of gain,” but he did allow that landscape art offered “an oasis in the desert,” “a refreshing influence,” to the “rich merchant and capitalist.” (Letter IV, pp. 238–39). In this he might well have been describing his own circle of patrons. A cursory skim through the names of owners of pictures that Durand exhibited in the 1840s through 1860s at the National Academy reveals a who’s who of family names of New York’s cultural and economic elite. While John Trumbull (as cited by Durand) might have advised “a stripling:” “‘You had better learn to make shoes or dig potatoes than to become a painter in this country’” (Letter IV, p. 238), Asher B. Durand derived a very comfortable living from his chosen muse.

The importance of *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York* in Durand’s oeuvre is confirmed by its presence as the only work listed for the year 1848 in the chronological listing of the artist’s major works in John Durand’s biography of his father, *The Life and Times of A.B. Durand* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1894; reprint ed., New York: Da Capo Press, 1970). The present work differs from the larger painting primarily in scale, but also in some important details. While the landscape elements remain substantially the same, Durand modified the positions of the three figures enjoying an idyllic day in the country. The larger canvas also includes a group of grazing cattle in the right foreground.

The hamlet of Dover Plains lies about 85 miles north of New York City in the Tenmile River valley west of the Taconic Mountains of east-central Dutchess County near the Connecticut border. The area was first settled around the turn of the nineteenth century and grew slowly. While Durand traveled frequently to nearby areas, it is not clear precisely when he stopped at Dover Plains. Given that he exhibited his large painting in Spring of 1848, he must have been there in a recent summer. The settlement was still rural and isolated; its citizens engaged in small-scale agriculture and dairy farming when Durand visited. The neighborhood did, however, boast a regionally famous “natural wonder,” James H. Smith, in his *History of Duchess* [sic] *County New York, 1683–1882* (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1882) begins his entry for Dover Plains with the following description:

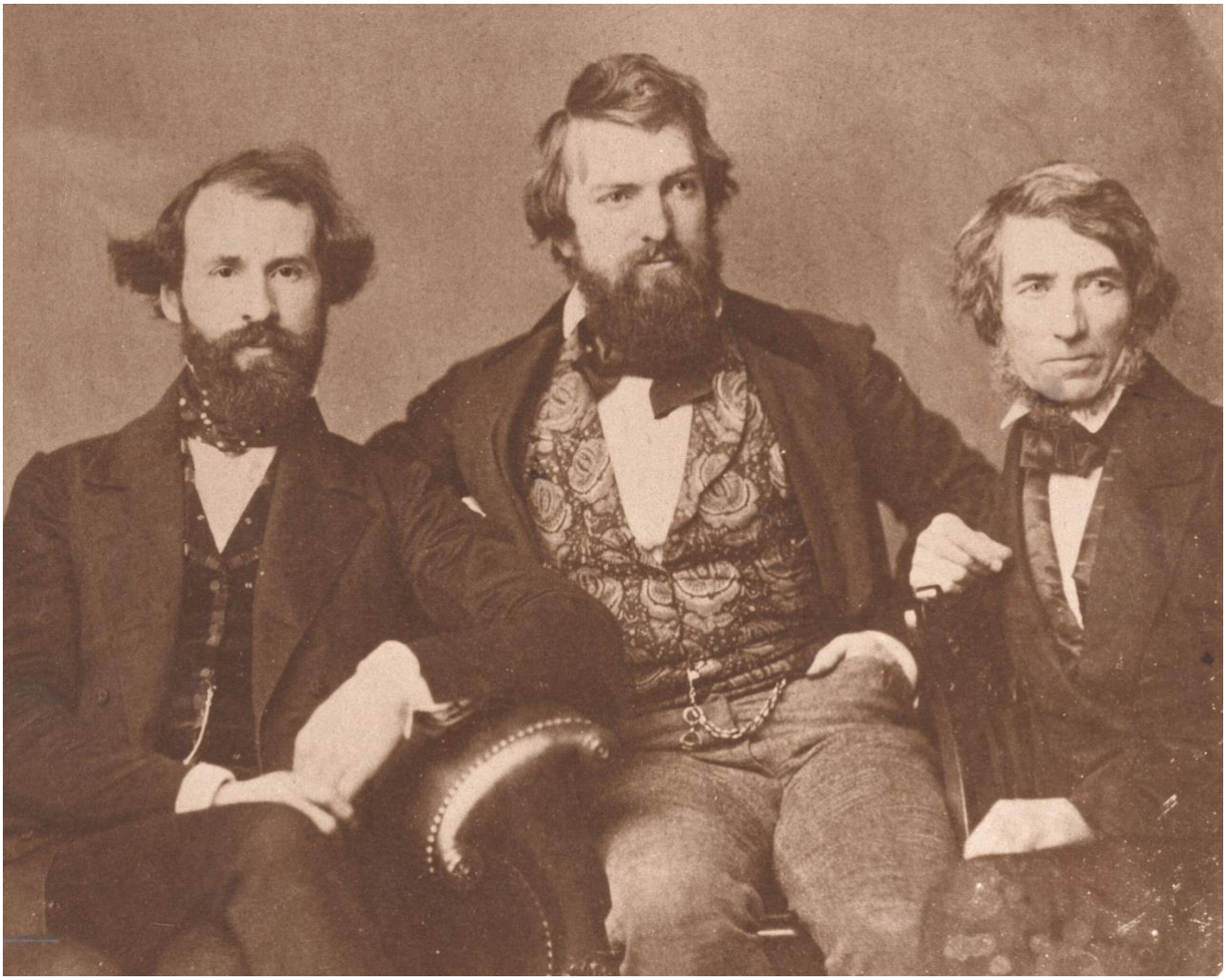
It is situated in the midst of charming scenery and has in its immediate vicinity natural curiosities which have attracted thousands of visitors. One of these, a rocky ravine, worn deep in the mountain

west of the village, whose arched opening resembles the entrance to some cathedral of mediaeval times is known as the "Dover Stone Church." Within this entrance is a somewhat spacious cavern, roofed and walled by massive rocks, while beyond, pierced deep in the mountain, stretches a mile or two of picturesque ravine.

Significantly, though Durand would certainly have known of the "Stone Church," that is not what he chose to paint. Instead, he offers a view of a modest landscape dotted with clearings, clumps of trees, rocky outcrops and nearby mountains, a view that he found quietly compelling. The three small figures atop the rocky high ground in the left foreground of the canvas are surrogates for the artist and the viewer. In both the larger and small versions, a female figure stands forward, shading her eyes as she contemplates the "charming scenery" before her. The sky is a mix of sun and cloud. Nature's variety displays itself. Durand felt moved to record the scene is multiple versions. The artist arrived shortly before a time of transformation for this country hamlet. In December 1848, the Harlem and New York Railroad extended its line to Dover Plains. That same year two hotels opened. Dover Plains became a a scenic day trip by train from New York City.

The provenance of this picture links two major American artists of the nineteenth century, Asher B. Durand and Henry Kirke Brown. Brown was younger by nearly a generation, but like Durand, a home-grown artist who went to Europe and arrived home with a mission: to celebrate the American experience in an art form dominated by the Western European tradition, which, in Brown's case, was sculpture. In 1846, Brown returned from four years in Europe and established a studio across the street from the National Academy of Design. (For an accessible account of Brown, see his alphabetical entry in David B. Dearinger, ed., *Painting and Sculpture in the Collection of the National Academy of Design* [New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2004], vol. 1, pp. 69–70.) With an agenda much like Durand's, Brown proceeded to sculpt marble portrait busts of William Cullen Bryant (1846–47; New York Historical, New York); Thomas Cole (c. 1850; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York); and Durand (1847; National Academy of Design, New York). Brown sculpted Durand in 1847, the same year that he was elected an Associate Academician at the National Academy. The men remained friends. A period photograph documents their relationship. Brown appears to have given the bust to Durand who kept it through his lifetime. John Durand gifted it to the National Academy after his father's death.

Brown went on to a distinguished career. Two of his statues stand, aligned with each other, in Union Square Park Manhattan—an equestrian George Washington to the south and Abraham Lincoln to the north. Did the artists, known to be friends, exchange mutual tokens of esteem, a bust for Durand, a painting for Brown? That is a likely speculation. Less likely is the speculation that somehow the two men were distantly related, both sharing the name Brown. No genealogical path for this has emerged and the name Brown appears frequently in diverse and unrelated families.



The revival of interest in the Hudson River School since the mid-twentieth century is a dominant theme in the historiography of American art. It is hard to appreciate, from our present vantage point, and with the body of spectacular work that has come to light, just how scorned and forgotten Hudson River School paintings and their artists were in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Thirty years after Durand's Letters were published, and a year before the artist died at the venerable age of ninety, American expatriate artist James McNeill Whistler delivered his celebrated "Ten O'Clock" lectures at Cambridge and in London. While Whistler generously allowed that "nature

contains the elements, in colour and form, of all pictures...," he went on to assert that "nature is very rarely right," adding, in fact, that nature offers "slovenly suggestions." According to Whistler, man is the "master" of Nature, because he understands her. The "artist is born to pick and choose ... that the results may be beautiful" (Mr. Whistler's "Ten O'Clock"). No more dramatic illustration need be mustered to illustrate the utter incompatibility of these two views of art and of God than the juxtaposition of these two documents, Durand's "Letters on Landscape Painting" and Whistler's "Ten O'Clock" lectures. While Whistler voiced the manifesto of the looming future, *Dover Plains, Dutchess County, New York* and works of its like restore to us today, the glory, wonder and truth of Asher B. Durand's skill and vision.

Durand's views of Dover Plains, as recorded in three paintings and a pencil sketch, are building blocks of the landscape philosophy and instruction he articulated seven years later. It is no accident that the three figures enjoying a pleasant day in nature in these paintings, presage the two figures in Durand's famous *Kindred Spirits* painted in 1849, with William Cullen Bryant and Thomas Cole standing on a promontory surveying Kaaterskill Falls in the Catskill Mountains (Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas).

CONDITION: Excellent. Canvas is relined onto a new four-member wood stretcher. A 1-1/2" vertical line of inpainting in the sky in the upper-left quadrant and two small dots of inpainting in the sky at center. A network of carefully inpainted drying craquelure in the foreground landscape around the group of figures at left, in the bottom right corner, and in parts of the middle background. Reproduction American fluted-cove frame with applied palmette corners.