



Figures in a Wooded Landscape

Date

1867

Primary Maker

Daniel Huntington

Medium

Oil on canvas

Description

In 1832, Daniel Huntington enrolled at Hamilton College, where he was inspired to become a painter by the presence on campus of an itinerant artist named Charles Loring Elliott. Although Huntington left Hamilton in 1836, without graduating, to study art in New York City first with Samuel F. B. Morse and then with Henry Inman, he received honorary degrees in 1850 and 1869. Huntington is best known for his portraits, including those of important figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Van Buren, but he also painted landscapes, genre scenes, and religious and historical subjects throughout his career. The term “Hudson River School” came to be applied, largely after the fact, to a group of artists and authors whose activity spanned much of the middle of the nineteenth century and who sought to elevate the cultural reputation of the United States by celebrating the country’s natural landscape as a source of identity and spiritual awakening. Their American landscapes—featuring the sublime beauty of the Hudson River Valley and the Catskill, Adirondack, and White Mountains, among other locales—were intended to rival the great history paintings of Europe. In this arena, Huntington was considered a successor to the famed English-born American painter Thomas Cole. In the summer of 1835 or 1836, Huntington visited a number of locations in the Hudson Highlands, including Verplanck’s Point, Dunderberg Mountain, and Rondout Creek, which fostered such a love “as has often since broken out amidst the harrassing [sic] fatigues of Portrait Painting, and resulted in occasionally a Landscape.” Rather than a literal landscape painting, *Figures in a Wooded Landscape* may instead be an allegory (a genre for which Cole was also known), for the composition is divided almost in two: the left side of the canvas features an ominous forest into which a traveler walks, while on the right side, trees open onto a majestic view of a lake with mountains in the distance, viewed by a second figure sitting on a rock in the middle ground. Perhaps the figures were meant to demonstrate the two moral paths available to individuals, the two phases of a person’s life, or, in response to the philosophy of the day—particularly that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau—human beings’ natural state versus the socialized or “civilized” state. *Figures in a Wooded Landscape* was previously owned by Melvin Endy, a former Hamilton College dean and professor of religion, and his wife, Carol, who had been given the painting as a wedding gift by German professor Thomas Colby, Class of 1942. In 1966, Colby lent the painting to an exhibition of alumni collections held at the Root Art Center. (SOURCE: Alcauskas, INNOVATIVE APPROACHES, HONORED TRADITIONS, 2017)

Dimensions

Composition: 19 1/2 x 40 in. (49.5 x 101.6 cm) Frame: 24 1/2 x 45 1/8 x 2 7/8 in. (62.2 x 114.6 x 7.3 cm)