



## 15: Asher B. Durand *Genesee Oaks* (1860)

Marlene Hamann-Whitmore

In this bucolic landscape, Asher B. Durand clearly demonstrates his mastery of a favored nineteenth-century art form. Capturing a view held by wealthy landowner James S. Wadsworth of Geneseo, New York, *Genesee Oaks* combines a fairly faithful record of a specific site with Durand's artistic and philosophical vision. Following in the footsteps of other nineteenth-century artists and poets, Durand—with Thomas Cole, an originator of the Hudson River School of landscape painting—viewed the natural world in all its beauty and grandeur as proof of and a blessing from a benevolent God.<sup>1</sup> By incorporating figures into this landscape, Durand presents a pastoral, almost biblical view of a unified coexistence between man and nature.

In a formula typical of many of his landscapes from this period, Durand divides *Genesee Oaks* quite distinctly in two, offering an extended long-range view on the left and a meticulously rendered foreground on the right. The shallow mid-ground extends the length of the composition as it plays host to a trinity of characters: a meandering herd of cows; a solitary wanderer; and the true protagonists—a gathering of stately oak trees.

The hills of the surrounding Genesee Valley, evident in the left of the composition, remain clearly visible today, almost 150 years after Durand painted *Genesee Oaks*. And the Genesee River, seen here as it makes one of its many twists and turns, remains a vibrant asset to the beauty of the valley as it flows northward from Pennsylvania to the falls of Rochester before joining the waters of Lake Ontario. Geneseo is located in Livingston County, which has retained its strong ties to farming, and herds of grazing dairy cattle remain a common sight in the region.

Durand has given special prominence to his depiction of the oaks. These grand and eloquent trees are a symbol of pride and longevity for the region. With an impressive lifespan of 150 to 300 years, the white oak (shown here) achieved an iconic status among the indigenous Seneca people, a status that was recognized and respected by the early European settlers as well. The constant ebb and flow of stability and change affects all cultures, and the steadfast nature of the white oak, in addition to its impressive size, has remained a constant in this area for centuries. The landscape and culture of this part of the Northeast began to change rapidly in the late 1700s as western New York opened for settlement, and for many the oaks provided (and still do) a much sought-after connection to the land and to the past.

In *Genesee Oaks*, the figure entering from the right is alone—and yet perfectly at home—in this wild pasture. The peaceful rambler is a figure common to many of Durand's landscapes. Here he provides us with a sense of scale, further impressing us with the grandeur of the oaks.<sup>2</sup> The figure also provides a human access point, allowing us to enter this new Eden as he has done. He is an active participant in this gently unfolding narrative, yet he is dwarfed by the quiet majesty of the natural world. He strolls forward at an unhurried pace, his left arm holding a staff or perhaps a fishing pole. It is through our identification and assimilation with this kind stranger that we can most fully appreciate the beauty of the valley on a summer day.

(Facing page)  
Asher B. Durand,  
1796–1886  
*Genesee Oaks*, 1860  
Oil on canvas, 28 1/4 x 42 in.  
Gift of the Women's Council in  
honor of Harris K. Prior, 74.5

Asher B. Durand,  
1796–1886  
*Genesee Oaks* (detail), 1860  
Oil on canvas, 28 1/4 x 42 in.  
Gift of the Women's Council in  
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Durand presents a combination of the general and the specific beauty of this particular place. His careful recording of the vegetation in the foreground displays an array of identifiable plants, such as yarrow and common burdock, both still found in the area.<sup>3</sup> The trees surrounding the bend in the river are cottonwoods, identifiable by their round, billowy crowns and the fact that then, as now, they seek out and flourish near sources of water, such as the Genesee River.<sup>4</sup> A winding river and a grove of trees are standard fare in landscape painting, and contemporary viewers might be tempted to dismiss these elements as generic compositional devices rather than an artist's rendering of a particular place. It is true that Durand was not beyond inserting his brand of artistic license into a painting. However, he had very strong feelings on what was permissible for artistic intervention and what was to be recorded as faithfully as possible:

*There can be no scene worthy of being painted, that does not possess certain characteristic features, which constitute its interest. These features are obvious at a glance, and must be preserved inviolate: there are others more or less subordinate—such should receive attention according to their relative importance.... Now, the artist is not only licensed, but enjoined to modify, or entirely omit all these subordinate details, whenever they detract from the beauty or other interest of predominant features;... but the elevations and depressions of the earth's surface composing the middle ground and distance... may not be changed in the least perceptive degree, most especially the mountain and hillforms. On these God has set his signet, and Art may not remove it....*<sup>5</sup>



View of the Genesee River Valley  
from Hartford House, 2005  
Photograph by the author

This being said, there is certainly enough evidence to suggest that *Genesee Oaks* is Durand's truthful depiction of a specific view—the view held by James S. Wadsworth (1807–1864) as he looked west from behind Hartford House, his home in Geneseo. Hartford House occupies a large tract of land—a combination of woods, gardens, pastures, and meadow—north of the village of Geneseo.<sup>6</sup> The specific character of this landscape is indebted in part to James Wadsworth (1768–1844), father of James S. Wadsworth.

James Wadsworth, along with his brother William, arrived in the Genesee Valley in 1790 and soon founded the village of Geneseo.<sup>7</sup> Together, brothers James and William purchased two thousand acres of rich but densely forested farmland along the Genesee River. By 1800, James Wadsworth alone owned 34,500 acres.<sup>8</sup>

Inspired by visits to England and the beauty of various managed and manicured English estates and meadows, the elder James was determined to preserve the original wooded character of much of his Livingston County plantation, in addition to leasing out large tracts for farming.<sup>9</sup> These seemingly contradictory agendas were married by an unusual legal clause, contained in the leases signed by all of Wadsworth's tenant farmers:

*Tenants are not to destroy, nor suffer to be destroyed, any shade tree, to leave growing on such lands as are to be cleared off, at the rate of one shade tree to every two acres, and occasionally a clump of shade trees; and in case such Lessees shall destroy, or suffer to be destroyed, any shade trees, they shall pay to the Lessor the sum of ten dollars for each and every shade tree so destroyed, as stipulated damages therefor.*<sup>10</sup>



This unique and stern proclamation was successful in producing the desired aesthetic effect. Wadsworth land became well known and easily recognizable by the mature and handsome oaks holding court throughout the countryside.

At his father's death, James S. Wadsworth inherited one of the largest estates in the country. Wadsworth was an influential and generous individual, and his stately home reflected his stature in the area. It seems most fitting that he would commission Durand to capture the view of which he would have been most proud—the view of the valley as seen from the site he chose for his home-stand. Durand traveled to Geneseo during the summer of 1859. He made several studies of trees while in the area, most inscribed on their lower margin “Geneseo,” with dates ranging from June 24, 1859, through July 27, 1859.<sup>11</sup> In a letter to his son John, dated August 7, 1859, Durand stated:

*With all my troubles I believe I have learnt more of the management of colors in the painting of trees than by all my previous practice altho' I have never produced so little in the same span of time, not having made but 4 studies in five weeks.*<sup>12</sup>

Durand may have been frustrated by his progress, but the resulting work, *Genesee Oaks*, was completed and exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1861.<sup>13</sup> It hung at Hartford House, remaining in the Wadsworth family, until the early 1970s.<sup>14</sup>

The Genesee River still bends west of Hartford House as Durand has pictured it, and several legendary groups of oaks still stand on the property. Without a doubt, Durand has compressed the northern and southern parameters and shortened the distance from house to river. However, the view of the valley in the background, “especially the mountain and hill forms,”<sup>15</sup> remains virtually unchanged from Durand's visit.

Asher B. Durand,  
1796–1886  
Pencil sketch, 1859  
13<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 9<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.  
Collection of the New-York  
Historical Society, 1918.159

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