

Asher Brown Durand (1796-1886)
American
***Genesee Oaks*, 1860**
Oil on canvas
Memorial Art Gallery



Learning to Look:

- What do you see in this picture?
- How can you figure out the location of this scene by looking at the land forms and the vegetation?
- What evidence of human activity do you see?
- Where is the artist? What details has he emphasized for you to see?
- Can you imagine some details he has chosen to not include?

Looking to Learn:

- The title identifies the painting as done near the Genesee River. Describe the path of the river and its effect on the land.
- What vegetation can you identify; is it still common in the Genesee area?
- The date of the painting is 1860. What clues can you find in the painting that tell you what is happening in the Genesee Valley at that time?
- The scene is actually near Geneseo, New York. How does that area look today compared to during the mid-19th century?
- Can you find clues in the painting as to how the painter, Asher Brown Durand, felt about the land and its new settlers?

In 1859 artist Asher Brown Durand spent several weeks in early summer in the Genesee Valley, probably invited to this region (just south of Rochester, NY) by one of the area's major landowners. During this visit he made a series of sketches that he used later in his New York City studio to create *Genesee Oaks*.

For a landowner in the 1850s, for whom commissioning documentation of his land holdings was almost as ordinary a decision as commissioning a family portrait, Durand would have been the natural choice for the artist. Since the 1840s, Durand had been identified as one of the leading contemporary painters, specializing in landscapes. During the 1840s Durand and fellow painter Thomas Cole developed what would be considered the first uniquely American style of painting, the Hudson River School. While not a formal school—it had no classrooms or official students—its principles influenced a generation of artists.

American in the 1840s was on the verge of tremendous change. The European settlers were beginning their moment westward in earnest, and they saw the extraordinary resources in the pristine wilderness as a divine gift—a gift both to be revered and cultivated. *Genesee Oaks* is an expression of both instincts, with its central portrait of three majestic tress—survivors of the old-growth forests—standing in the midst of the newly cleared land.



500 University Avenue ♦ Rochester, NY 14607 ♦ (585) 473-7720 ♦ <http://mag.rochester.edu>

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