

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Asher B. Durand's *Progress*, Most Valuable Gift of a Single Work of Art
in VMFA's History, Enters Museum Collection**

Gift marks first time the painting has been in public domain since its creation in 1853

Richmond, VA—The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts recently received the generous anonymous gift of Asher B. Durand's painting *Progress (The Advance of Civilization)*, which was approved by the VMFA Board of Trustees yesterday. One of the most important works of American art in private hands, this is the highest valued gift of a single work of art in VMFA's history, and represents the first time the painting has been held outside of private collections since it was painted in 1853. Because of the extraordinary generosity of the donor, this beloved, canonical painting now enters the public domain, allowing the citizens of Virginia to be among the first to benefit from its presence in its new home at VMFA.



Progress, (The Advance of Civilization), 1853, Asher B. Durand (American, 1796-1886), oil on canvas. Gift of an Anonymous Donor.

Commissioned by the financier and industrialist Charles Gould (1811–1870), this work complements VMFA's collection of paintings by other Hudson River School artists, including Thomas Cole, Jasper Francis Cropsey, Frederic Edwin Church, George Inness and Robert Seldon Duncanson. Only a handful of masterpieces in American art—including Thomas Cole's *The Oxbow* and George Inness's *The Lackawanna Valley* (which hang in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Art respectively)—rival *Progress* in dramatizing the meeting of nature and civilization.

“As one of the best known American paintings made in the nineteenth-century, *Progress* considerably elevates the quality of the Virginia Museum of Fine Art's collection of American art,” says VMFA's

Director Alex Nyerges. “This incredible gift affords our visitors from Virginia and around the world the opportunity to experience a masterpiece by one of the country's greatest painters.”

Since its creation, *Progress* has provided an object lesson in several aspects of cultural and social history, including the Industrial Revolution, ecology and deforestation, the growth of American railroads, and Native American policies. In the painting, a group of Native Americans stand to the left of the trees facing a stream reminiscent of the Hudson, Susquehanna and Delaware rivers. To the right, a small town can be seen along with a steam-spewing locomotive and livestock following the path of telegraph poles. *Progress* presents a bold joining of opposites, a merging of the old law—nature and indigenous populations—and the new law, represented by industry and settlement.

“This painting suggests the artist's awareness of recent Native American history,” explains Leo Mazow, VMFA's Louise B. and J. Harwood Cochrane Curator of American Art. “As tightly composed and naturalistic as the painting is, lifelikeness and documentary history are less the point of the work than Durand's effort to balance the signs of ‘progress’ in all its majesty, but with its very real costs.”

Progress will be on view in VMFA's American Galleries as of December 18, 2018. In fall 2019 it will be joined by objects from the museum's Native American collection—including a late nineteenth-century Crow *War Shirt* and

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's *War Torn Dress*—offering counter-narratives to the visualization of settlement and expansion.

Durand's painting will augment educational programming at VMFA, said Michael Taylor, VMFA's Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Art and Education. "*Progress* will be featured prominently in gallery programming, especially docent-led tours for students, supporting the Virginia Standards-of-Learning across a range of subject areas. The painting strengthens the museum's ability to present the richness of American art and cultural history."

About *Progress (The Advance of Civilization)*

Progress is one of the most frequently published and discussed American landscape paintings, finding its way into general surveys and critical studies alike. In art history scholarship, the painting presents an early, but frequently followed example of the so-called middle landscape or middle state ethic, in which the iconography of industry and the bounty of nature mesh with and envelop each other. The painting was commissioned by financier, industrialist and collector Charles Gould (1811–1870), who would shortly thereafter become broker and then treasurer for the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad. Gould did not dictate the style or subject matter of *Progress*, but he was one of many antebellum patrons who commissioned art that preserved in paint the kind of landscapes threatened by their own interests in locomotive industries.

Progress was held in the private collection of Jack Warner before it was sold in 2011. The painting was gifted to VMFA by an anonymous donor in December 2018.

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 40,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804-340-1400 or visit www.VMFA.museum.

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