

# Elliott Fine Art

Old Masters to Early Modern

Alexandre-Louis-François d'Albert-Durade  
(1804 Lausanne – 1886 Geneva)

*Portrait of a bearded man with a pickaxe, against a landscape*

Signed, located and dated lower right: *Albert-Durade / Genève 1852*

Oil on canvas

65.4 x 54.2 cm. (25  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 21  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.)



François d'Albert Durade's remarkable portrait of a bushy-bearded labourer was painted in Geneva in 1852. Closely-cropped by the picture plane and placed in front of a receding landscape, Albert-Durade's sitter is given a monumental grandeur. With the tool of his trade slung across the shoulder and black hat perched nonchalantly at an angle, revealing a lighter patch of skin untouched by the sun's rays, the labourer takes a pause from the day's toil, perhaps taking place on the calm shores of Lake Geneva below an atmospherically clouded sky. The fruit of his labour, a wall or building being reduced to rubble, is visible behind him. His beautifully crisp turquoise shirt remains impossibly clean, unsullied by the dust and dirt inevitably created by such hard exertion.

This Romanticised image of a dignified and heroic manual labourer stands in stark contrast to Gustave Courbet's infamous *Stonebreakers* (fig. 1), exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1850-51. Albert-Durade would certainly have known of the now-destroyed painting, and the polemic it caused, and one wonders if his portrait is in some ways a response to it, giving dignity back to the peasant worker who nobly toils for the good of society. Certainly Albert-Durade's sitter, with his relaxed manner and luxuriant beard, is a world away from Courbet's figures in tattered clothing, engaged in back-breaking work.



Fig. 1, Gustave Courbet, *Stonebreakers*, 1849, oil on canvas, 165 x 257 cm, formerly Galerie Neue Meister (destroyed by fire in 1945)

Yet can one detect a certain weariness or resignation in the tanned but serious face of this man, with his furrowed brow and piercing eyes, which lock with those of the viewer. And who is the sitter: a model posed in the studio or an actual labourer, met on a countryside excursion, as was the case with Courbet's *Stonebreakers*. Albert-Durade's painting is an enigma and, in some ways a paradox, a Realist's subject painted with a Realist's attention to detail, yet not fully reflecting the harsh reality of a peasant labourer's existence.

Albert-Durade was orphaned at a young age and subsequently adopted by his godfather's sister, Jeanne Sara Durade. He initially studied theology before entering the studio of Joseph Hornung, an autodidactic artist. In 1834 Albert-Durade married Julie Covelle, an accomplished flower painter. Active as both a photographer and painter, much of Albert-Durade's work aimed at preserving the history and image of Geneva as it was in his time. He was also an accomplished portraitist, sought after by prominent Genevans. Albert-Durade's best known work is his depiction of the writer George Eliot, painted in 1849 when the author lodged at his house in Geneva. The artist was a close friend of Eliot (fig. 2), one of the most famous novelists of her time, and translated her works into French. Albert-Durade later accompanied her to London where she took him to see the works of Turner, and they would subsequently keep up a lively and erudite correspondence.

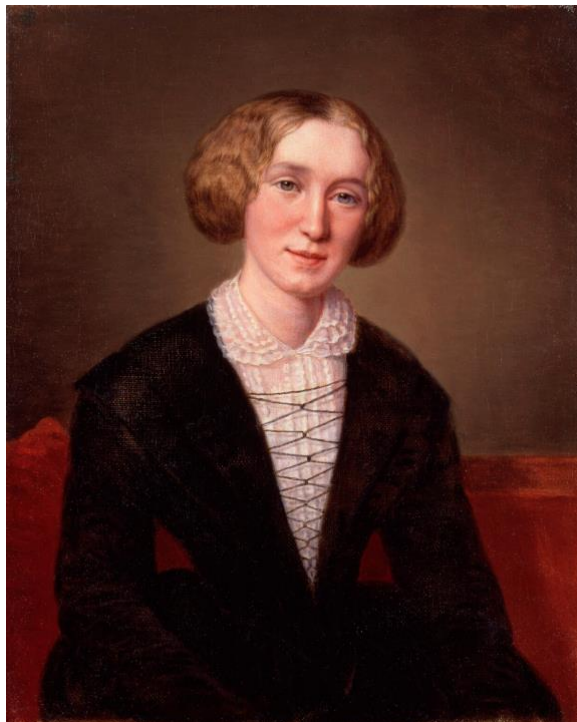


Fig. 2, François d'Albert-Durade, *Portrait of George Eliot*, 1850, oil on canvas, 34 x 26.5 cm, National Portrait Gallery

It's tempting to contemplate whether Eliot's philosophies and writings influenced Albert-Durade's approach to Realism (or perhaps vice versa). Indeed, the energising principle of Eliot's art was Realism. As she explains in her 1856 essay *The Natural History of German Life*, 'Art is the nearest thing to life: it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot'. This could serve as a fitting coda to Albert-Durade's portrait.