

SEEING AMERICA: Albert Bierstadt's *The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California, 1865*

B

ierstadt's paintings of the West gave nineteenth-century Americans a spectacular view of their expanding nation and its unique wonders.



Albert Bierstadt (1830 – 1902)
The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California, 1865
Oil on panel
Clara and Edwin Strassenburgh Fund and Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 92.78
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

The Art

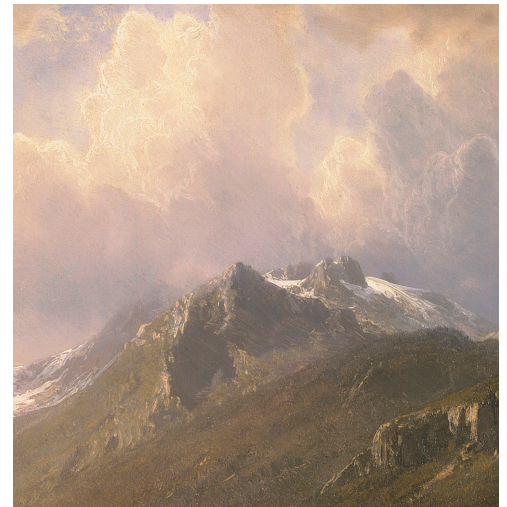
The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California inspires something of the same awe reported by nineteenth-century travelers to America's western territories. It retains the immediacy of Bierstadt's open-air sketches in the pocket-sized notebooks he took on his second trip west in 1863. Two years later, at home in New York, he was able to paint the scene with such specific believability that the plants can be identified: red Indian paintbrush, white grass of Parnassus or hyacinth, yellow monkey flower, goldenrod, waterleaf. The size and clarity of the foreground plants and large indigenous volcanic rock suggest that the artist—and the viewer—have just stepped into this beautiful unspoiled and unpopulated place.



Bierstadt presents a vast expanse of land stretching to a very distant horizon and rich with deer, water, meadowland, and cottonwood trees. All are safely enclosed by the majestic massive mountains whose rugged

snow-capped peaks repeat the diagonal lines and shape of the foreground rocks. The compositional balance, the stillness of the scene with its golden sunlight and white clouds suggest the promised Eden of America's destiny.

The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California, at approximately 15 x 21 inches, is a small painting compared to Bierstadt's huge panoramic views that were



exhibited throughout the country introducing Americans to the newly discovered natural wonders of the western territories. Wonder-struck viewers now understood that America offered vistas as magnificent and inspiring as those of the “old world” of Europe.

Wilderness landscape paintings such as *The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California*, provide the viewer with an essentially spiritual, rather than intellectual or social, aesthetic experience. There are no people in this scene. Indeed, “like many of Bierstadt’s other works, this immaculate landscape represents a ‘primal vision,’ a landscape depicted as if it were seen for the first time by human eyes” (*Seeing America*, 87).



Albert Bierstadt (1830 – 1902)
Looking Up the Yosemite Valley, c. 1863-75
 Oil on canvas
 Collection of the Haggin Museum, Stockton, CA

The Artist



Born in Germany in 1830, Albert Bierstadt immigrated with his family two years later to New Bedford, Massachusetts. Little is known about his early training, but in 1850 he exhibited thirteen monochromatic paintings and one drawing in Boston and advertised himself as an instructor in New Bedford.



Napoleon Sarony
 Albert Bierstadt
 Photograph

His lifelong interests in photography and American landscape were cultivated during a three-year collaboration with a daguerreotype photographer who also produced American scenery for theatrical productions. After travel and study in Europe, Bierstadt gained national attention for his proficiency in painting landscapes, and was invited to join Frederick W. Lander’s 1859 exploration and engineering expedition in the West.

Bierstadt made sketches and took stereoscopic photographs, that served as inspiration when he returned to New York and began his first large paintings of western landscapes. Of these, the most impressive was *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak*, 1863, that measures 73 1/2 x 120 3/4 inches. Two years later he sold the painting for \$25,000, an astonishing sum at the time.



Albert Bierstadt (1830 – 1902)
The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak, 1863
 Oil on canvas
 Rogers Fund, 1907 (07.123)
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

On a second trip west in 1863 he saw the California mountains and did the sketches that were later translated into paintings such as *The Sierras Near*

Lake Tahoe, California. His work during those years combined his extensive European training with the American landscape subject matter of his travels in the North American West. The Rockies and Yosemite as Bierstadt portrayed them thrilled audiences.

In 1875, Bierstadt's *The Discovery of the Hudson* was purchased by the United States government for the collection of the United States House of Representatives. This was a suitable subject for Albert Bierstadt whose interest in the landscape's natural beauty and atmospheric qualities of light place him in the **Hudson River School** tradition.

By the 1880s, however, national artistic tastes had changed, photography had introduced new standards of realism, and Bierstadt's paintings were increasingly criticized as overly dramatic and excessive. He did enjoy a posthumous revival in the 1960s, when interest grew in environmental concerns and the impact of advancing technology on indigenous populations. His smaller works, often preparatory for his huge paintings, are particularly respected for the immediacy of their representations. Mount Bierstadt in Colorado is named in his honor.

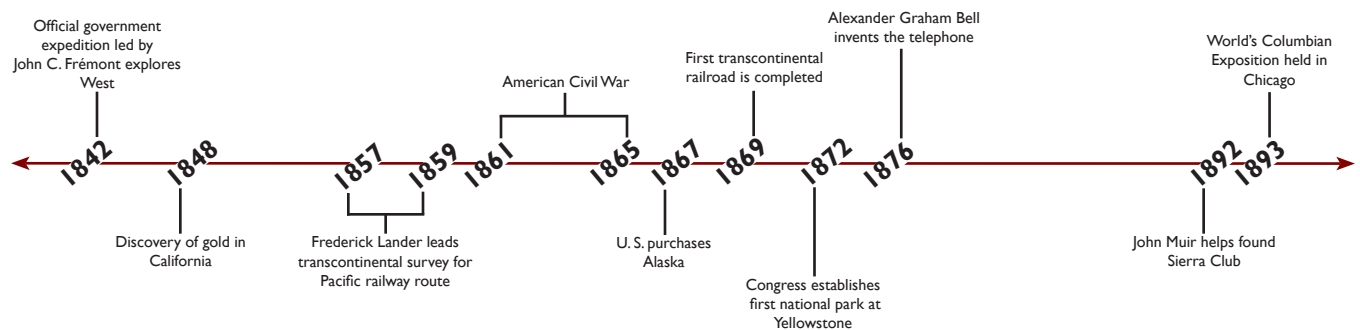


Albert Bierstadt (1830 – 1902)
The Discovery of the Hudson, 1874
 Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives

Glossary

Hudson River School: Mid-19th century American art movement in which painters celebrated the landscape of Hudson River Valley and nearby areas.

America



In the decades before the Civil War, westward expansion had often dominated the political and economic issues of the nation. By 1845, the concept of America's **Manifest Destiny** had become the standard philosophical rationale for much of the country's foreign policy as well.



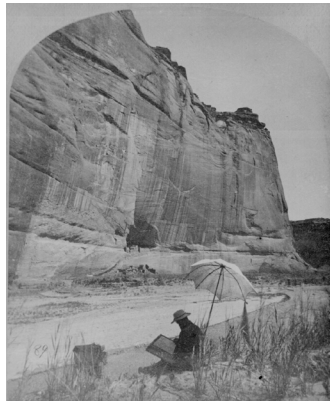
John Gast
American Progress, 1872
 Museum of the American West
 Autry National Center for the American West,
 Los Angeles; 92.126.1

It was believed that Euro-American culture, as it was developed in the United States, was obviously "intended" to prevail over the North American continent, and that the principles of freedom and the pursuit of prosperity and happiness embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were to be fulfilled by territorial expansion under the jurisdiction of the United States.

Glossary

Manifest Destiny: 19th century self-proclaimed belief that the United States was divinely ordained to expand across the North American continent.

Explorers, trappers, and artists had brought back to the East magnificent tales and images of the landscape that inspired migrations, easing the stresses of overcrowding in eastern cities and exhausted farmland in the Midwest.



Timothy O'Sullivan

Distant view of Ancient Ruins in lower part of Cañon de Chelle [Ariz. Terr.] ... Showing their position in the walls and elevation above bed of cañon, 1873

National Archives and Records

Administration

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The discovery of gold in California in 1848 sparked the most dramatic migration; subsequent discoveries of rich minerals in Colorado, Nevada, Montana, and the Dakotas likewise changed the face of the West. With the Compromise of 1850, California gained statehood; in 1860 the Pony Express began eleven-day mail service from St. Louis to Sacramento. By the 1860s, cattle ranching and farming (encouraged by the Homestead Act of 1862, which gave free land to those who worked it) were also spurring settlement. Also in 1862, Congress passed legislation to assist in funding the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, a monumental undertaking completed in 1869.

The impact on the indigenous population, however, was ultimately devastating. By 1890, Indians were confined to reservations, buffalo were all but extinct, and the United States Census Bureau declared that the "frontier" was closed because the line

between civilized settlement and wilderness had been erased. The population of the United States had spread across the continent to the Pacific coast. The **Gilded Age**, as the post-Civil War era is often called, had seen an astonishing growth in capital wealth, technological innovation, population, and urbanization, much of it fueled by the sheer energy and enthusiasm generated by the natural awe-inspiring land of the West.

See also Diane P. Fischer, "Albert Bierstadt: The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California (1865)," in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 85–88.



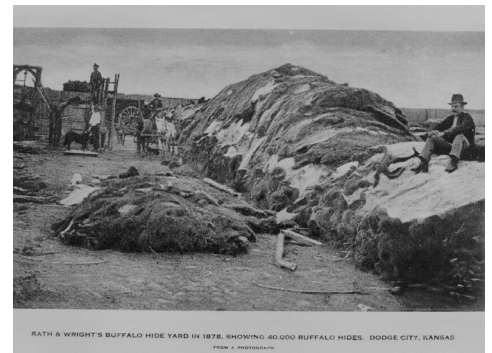
Golden Spike Ceremony, 1869

National Archives and Records Administration

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Glossary

Gilded Age: Post-Civil War and post-Reconstruction era from the 1870s to the 1890s of unprecedented growth of industry, agriculture and population expansion.



Rath & Wright's buffalo hide yard in 1878, showing 40,000 buffalo hides, Dodge City, Kansas

National Archives and Records Administration

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Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell you where this is?

What clues in the painting tell you the season or time of day?

How does knowing the title, *The Sierras near Lake Tahoe, California*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



Comparing and Contrasting

Compare two paintings by Albert Bierstadt *The Sierras near Lake Tahoe, California* and *Looking Up the Yosemite Valley*. Do you think these are historical or documentary paintings? What qualities of the western landscape does Bierstadt express?



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Oil on panel

Clara and Edwin Strassenburgh Fund and Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
92.78

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Albert Bierstadt (1830 – 1902)

Looking Up the Yosemite Valley, c. 1863-75

Oil on canvas

Collection of the Haggin Museum, Stockton, CA

Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist and America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

Exploring the Context

Compare Bierstadt's painting *The Sierra Nevada Mountains Near Lake Tahoe, California* with other works of art from the same time period. With what events or issues is each painting concerned?



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Mortimer Smith (1840 – 1896)
Home Late, 1866
Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 75.139
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



David Gilmour Blythe (1815 – 1865)
Trial Scene, ca. 1862-1863
Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 41.24
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



James Henry Beard (1814 – 1893)
The Night Before the Battle, 1865
Oil on canvas

Gift of Dr. Ronald M. Lawrence, 78.15
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

Finding and Analyzing Point of View

Many artists in the mid-19th century wanted to capture the beauty of nature before it was destroyed by humankind. Explore artists' history of romanticizing the American landscape. What effect did the artists have on Americans' attitude toward the land and ecology?



John Frederick Kensett (1816 – 1872)

A Showery Day, Lake George, ca. 1860

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 74.29

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Asher Brown Durand (1796 – 1886)

Genesee Oaks, 1860

Oil on canvas

Gift of the Women's Council in honor of Harris K. Prior, 74.5

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester



Thomas Cole (1801 – 1848)

Genesee Scenery, 1846–1847

Oil on panel

Gift of Howard and Florence Merritt, 94.40

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester



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Reading and Interpreting Visual Language

Compare the visual imagery in Bierstadt's painting with the verbal images evoked by Katherine Lee Bates in *America the Beautiful* written after a trip to the top of Pikes Peak, Colorado.

America the Beautiful
Lyrics by Katherine Lee Bates, 1893
Music composed by Samuel A. Ward

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain.
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea.

O beautiful for pilgrim feet
Whose stern impassion'd stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat
Across the wilderness.
America! America!
God mend thine ev'ry flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law.

O beautiful for heroes prov'd
In liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved,
And mercy more than life.
America! America!
May God thy gold refine
Till all success be nobleness,
And ev'ry gain divine.

O beautiful for patriot dream
That sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam
Undimmed by human tears.
America! America!
God shed His grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea.

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