



Merced River in Yosemite

Albert Bierstadt (BEER-shtaht) 1868, G301, 81.6

North America, United States, 19th Century landscape

- probably painted during 1867-69 trip abroad
- used pencil sketches, plein air oil studies and his own photo record from his 1863 trip
- “cool, objective, and detailed” style; captures the grandeur of nature in the West
- created many western panoramas on huge canvases, for display in public venues such as the U.S. Capitol or for the homes of the wealthy

Questions

1. Look closely at the painting. Find a place for your eye to start and then let it travel throughout the picture. Describe what you see.
2. If you could transport yourself into the picture, where would you want to be? Explain.
3. What do you think the artist wanted to emphasize in this painting? (a place, an activity, a feeling, other?)

Key Points: Composition, Theme, etc.

1. Complex foreground spaces with little middle ground occupy the lower third of the scene before mountains loom out of mist in the distance and command our attention.
 - In the shelter of the boulders two men smoke their pipes and one tends the fire that bathes them in a rosy glow, a complement to the greens of the trees in shadow above them.
 - One figure gestures to our right, drawing attention to the man fishing in the shimmering light of sunset (or dawn).
 - Filtered light, mists and clouds in pastel tones create the feeling of recession to the distant peaks and balmy sky.
2. Composition influenced by photography
 - Rocks in foreground have stereoscopic definition; stereoscopes were new and popular.

- When using a large format camera at eye level, distant mountains appear to loom overhead and their color intensity fades considerably; the height of trees in the foreground equals that of the mountains from this perspective. (see Watkins photos www.yosemite.ca.us)
 - Bierstadt saw Carleton Watkins' large scale Yosemite photos in New York City in 1862 and may have decided to return to the West as a result.
3. Bierstadt was considered one of the "second generation" of Hudson River School of painters
- Hudson River School "is now accepted as shorthand for the dominant American landscape vision" from roughly 1825 to 1875. "This loosely-knit group of artists...wanted "to create an 'American' landscape vision...based on the exploration of Nature -- the world defined as a resource for spiritual renewal and as an expression of cultural and national identity." [Ferber, *The Hudson River School*, 2009]
 - His use of glowing light predated luminism: "an effect of light that some see as uniquely American, an objectivity leading to precisely delineated forms, an absence of visible brushstrokes, a reduction of the number of compositional components, with a tendency to treat them as abstract forms, masses, and areas." [Craven, *American Art, History and Culture*, 2003]
 - He was considered successor to J.M.W. Turner, whose "concept of the frontier intersected neatly with mid-nineteenth century Manifest Destiny, an ideology rooted in the belief that the whole of the North American continent was divinely fated to come under the authority of the United States." [Ferber, *The Hudson River School*, 2009]
 - His composition and themes appear influenced by landscape artists such as Claude Lorraine
 - eye follows diagonal path from crisp foreground down path to sunlit boat on water, through trees and across to mountains in distance
 - forms are in balance; outlines in near middle and far distance echo or repeat
 - Bierstadt preferred wilderness scenes and gave them a romantic interpretation evoking Eden and nature's awesome beauty
 - The '49 Gold Rush and end of the Civil War fed the desire to fulfill America's "Manifest Destiny." Bierstadt's inclusion of European Americans (as opposed to Native Americans or wildlife) hints at the passing of the wilderness and the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny.
 - He often took liberties with his landscapes to create impressive peaks but the details of objects in foreground are done with sharply drawn naturalism.

Criticism

- huge canvases considered "self-indulgent" and overpowered smaller paintings of peers
- too romantic, too much manipulation of light, atmospheric effects, topographical detail
- too much in the vein of the Dusseldorf style; "did not create a great picture; merely transcribed a grand scene"

- too much of a self-promoter; irritated fellow painters and juries; manipulated patrons and Congress to buy paintings
- respect for his work gained ground in the 1940's; now regarded as one of the greatest landscape artists
- “These large panoramic paintings by Bierstadt and Hill demonstrate that the documentary impulse was often overridden by the desire to impress audiences with the sheer scale and topographical diversity of the North American West. Such paintings implied an infinite abundance and they encouraged nationalistic sentiments and curiosity. Among other things, they stimulated additional travel, yet embedded in their iconography are hints of negativity--motifs referring to the inroads of tourism, the displacement of Native populations, and the eventual depletion of natural resources--ideas following upon the realization that the continental expansion would cease once the Pacific was reached.” [Ferber, *The Hudson River School*, 2009]

Biographical Timeline

(compiled from Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco catalogue, *Albert Bierstadt, An observer of air, light and the feeling of a place* and Ferber's *Albert Bierstadt, Art and Enterprise*)

1830	born in Solingen, Germany
1832	parents emigrate and settle in New Bedford, MA
1852	promoted and helped George Harvey with his <i>Dissolving Views</i> tour of American scenery with a Drummond Light to project 15 by 17 foot images (admission \$.25)
1853-57	studies in Dusseldorf, travels Europe with painters such as Worthington Whittredge and Sanford Robinson Gifford
1858	joins Colonel Frederic W. Lander, in charge of surveying a route from the Mississippi to the Pacific for the Pacific Coast Railway; helped with photography by F.S. Frost
1859 spring	as artist-explorer, takes pivotal trip to the Rockies which “provided the critical visual and emotional experiences that launched his career”
1859 fall	establishes studio in New York City
1860's	rapid rise to fame “in his short heyday in the sixties;...reputation suffered an equally rapid and public decline”
1863	returns to the West; visits Yosemite and Columbia River; sees Carleton Watkins large format western photos
1864	shows work at Sanitary Fair (Red Cross precursor); garners much praise Paintings, articles and photos of Yosemite in the 1860's prompted Congress to save it as “an inalienable public trust,” setting it on the path to becoming a national park.
1865	<i>The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak</i> sold to a British railroad magnate for \$25,000, an unheard of price for American landscape, and “broke Frederic Church's sales record several times over.”

1866	marries Rosalie Osborne Ludlow; builds dream home Malkasten at Irvington-on-Hudson, NY
1867-69	returns to Europe to travel and paints
1870's	American tastes shifted to the "more painterly and intimate" landscapes of French artists, that is, from "a vehicle for national and religious messages to a medium of private poetry and the subjective interpretation of nature."
1871-73	spends two years painting in California
1877	first of many trips to Bahamas for his wife's health
1882	Malkeston burns.
1893	Rosalie dies. (Mt. Evans in Colorado originally named Mt. Rosalie; see painting)
1894	marries Mrs. Mary Hicks Stewart, widow of David Stewart and father of Isabella Stewart Gardner (from an earlier marriage)
1895	bankruptcy (his finances separate from his wife's)
1902	dies in New York

Websites of interest:

[Albert Bierstadt, essay by Matthew Biagell](#) www.tfaoi.com/permc/ab.htm

[Albert Bierstadt Online](#) www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/bierstadt_albert.html

[Albert Bierstadt Paintings](#) [The Albert Bierstadt Gallery](#) <http://www.xmission.com/~emailbox/glenda/bierstadt/bierstadt.html>

[About Carleton Watkins | People & Places | Smithsonian Magazine](#)

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/carleton-watkins.html>

[Yosemite History: Carleton E. Watkins, photographer](#) www.yosemite.ca.us