

Albert Bierstadt



Albert Bierstadt. Photograph by Napoleon Sarony

Albert Bierstadt was born in Solingen, Germany, on January 7, 1830, to Henry and Christina Bierstadt. Two years later, the family immigrated to the United States, settling in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where Bierstadt and his seven siblings spent their childhood. From an early age, Bierstadt was interested in painting, learning on his own until, at age twenty-three, he returned to Germany intent on studying with his relative, Johann Peter Hasenclever, a well-respected artist. Due to Hasenclever's sudden death before his arrival, Bierstadt studied at the Düsseldorf School of Painting instead. After less than a year of formal training, Bierstadt travelled through Europe compiling sketches he would use to create the first of his expansive landscape paintings.

Bierstadt returned to New Bedford, after nearly five years in Europe, to create artworks based on his travels. As a result of his unique German training, which included a detailed and sprawling style, Bierstadt's paintings differed from those currently available in the United States. He used these skills when he joined a railroad survey lead by Colonel Frederick Lander in 1859 and journeyed through the Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains in Wyoming. During the six months he spent in the western United States, Bierstadt again gathered numerous sketches for future paintings. After this trip, he established a studio in New York City where he created elaborate paintings of the American frontier. He immediately captivated his eastern audience with his portrayal of the West and his grand paintings of the Rocky Mountains. For many, it was their first glimpse of the American West.

With his paintings gathering praise, Bierstadt planned a second trip west, however, with the ongoing Civil War and fighting between settlers and American Indians, the expedition was cancelled out concern for safety. Eventually, Bierstadt befriended author Fitz Hugh Ludlow while they both worked in New York and the pair planned a six-month trip bound for California in 1863. They met with several other artists in San Francisco and the large group travelled inland camping for months in the wilderness. As they explored the Rocky Mountains, the Columbia River, and Yosemite Valley, Bierstadt sketched, and Ludlow wrote about the West with the intention of publishing a book. Bierstadt amassed enough visual resources during this trip to paint dozens of striking landscapes.

Bierstadt's noteworthy painting, *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, completed in 1863, moved throughout the United States on display in galleries and art fairs, contributing to his rise to prominence as an American landscape artist. Due to his intrigue with the American West and the increasing popularity of lofty western landscape paintings, Bierstadt continued creating and showing these artworks. With his success mounting, Bierstadt purchased five acres of land in New York and built "Malkasten," a large home with a massive studio. He also accepted a commission from the government to produce two artworks for the House Chamber in the United States Capitol Building. He created *Discovery of the Hudson* and *Entrance into Monterey*, as representative examples of important moments in American history that also complemented his majestic natural style.

Throughout the 1870s, Bierstadt continued to work on both European and American landscapes. He travelled through the United States and Europe, spending a considerable amount of time in California where he received several commissions. However, once the Transcontinental Railroad was completed, the West no longer represented vast, unobtainable beauty, and a drastic increase in settlement led to a decreased interest in large western landscapes. The market for these paintings shifted at this time, and he felt it necessary to accommodate. Patrons wanted smaller artworks with more details, so he created new paintings with that in mind, but they did not sell as well as his previous works.

Misfortunes set in. In 1882, "Malkasten" caught fire and burned down, destroying Bierstadt's possessions and several paintings. He struggled to keep up with changes in the art world, and both the Paris and Chicago World's Fairs denied his artworks because of their old-fashioned appearance. In 1895, after years of inability to sell paintings or receive commissions, Bierstadt had no choice but to declare bankruptcy. Despite public disinterest, he continued to paint until his death on February 18, 1902, in New York City. Over his lifetime, Bierstadt created nearly 500 paintings. His artworks received renewed interest in the mid-20th century and today are considered essential to understanding the narrative of the American West.



Albert Bierstadt, *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak*, 1863, oil on canvas, 73 1/2 x 120 3/4 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1907 (07.123), Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

During his third trip west in 1871, Albert Bierstadt studied the Sierra Nevada Mountains, spending extensive time in the northern part of the range, at Donner Pass. This was in preparation for a significant commission for Collis Huntington, a railway industrialist of the Central Pacific Railroad who was instrumental in the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. Huntington wanted a painting to display his railway's crowning achievement of tunneling through the immense Sierra Nevada Mountains. Joslyn's *Dawn at Donner Lake* (left) is one of several artworks, including *View of Donner Lake, California* (right), that Bierstadt created prior to *Donner Lake from the Summit* (below) – his response to Huntington's commission.

Dawn at Donner Lake is among Bierstadt's darker paintings. The image portrays a mountainous landscape with the edge of Donner Lake calmly reflecting the rising sun in the background. Scores of coniferous trees, dead and alive, cover the rocky, uneven foreground and rolling foothills; dark gray clouds, not yet broken by the emerging sun, conceal the sky. The painting, though murky, captures the stark beauty of the Sierra Nevada Mountains' harsh environment with an impression of grandeur.



During Bierstadt's lifetime, Donner Lake witnessed one of the most tragic tales in American history. Snow and ice trapped eighty-nine travelers in the mountains near this lake during the winter of 1846. Forty-one perished and, out of desperation, the starving group cannibalized their

remains. The survivors descended the mountain to share their account of the horrific winter and this company, the "Donner Party," became the namesake for the lake and surrounding area. Bierstadt was no doubt aware of this area's tragic past, and he may have reflected it in the dark, unsettling aspects of his painting. Despite the unfortunate history of Donner Pass, Bierstadt's portrayals are stunning, with layers of mountains and foothills overlaid with detailed trees, grass, and rocks.

Similar to most landscape artists of the 19th century, Bierstadt refused to accept the invading settlement; he focused instead on the scenery not yet touched by pioneers. When Bierstadt initially painted the West, there was no colonizing encroachment because expansion had just begun and only natural sceneries existed. Further into his career, however, railroads and settlement had crossed the country. Despite Bierstadt's commission coming from a railroad tycoon, the infrastructure's progress is not visible in Bierstadt's *Dawn at Donner Lake*. The artist included a small train track in the version created for Huntington; it is a minor part of the work and placed in the background as if an afterthought. By depicting only the natural elements of the country in a sweeping, detailed view of the western half of America, *Dawn at Donner Lake* represents Bierstadt's ideal western landscape.

IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM): Albert Bierstadt, *View of Donner Lake, California*, 1871–1872, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 29 1/4 x 21 7/8 in., Gift of Anna Bennett and Jessie Jonas in memory of August F. Jonas, Jr., Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1984.54; Albert Bierstadt, *Donner Lake from the Summit*, 1873, oil on canvas, 182.9 x 304.8 cm, Gift of Archer Milton Huntington, The New York Historical Society, 1909.16

a biography

American Landscapes

Albert Bierstadt's paintings of the American West present a peacefulness and isolation often felt in the 19th century's expansive frontier. His artworks display scenic landscapes with extensive detail in areas and open air when appropriate. Before settlement of the western states, this land looked drastically different; few towns existed and only small ranches and farms dotted the interior. American landscape paintings in the 19th century depicted a frontier that would never again be wild.



Bierstadt and other landscape artists of the American West proved vital to the settlement of the United States in the era of expansion. At the forefront of these artists, Bierstadt presented the western half of the young nation to an audience that would not have the opportunity to see the terrain that lay just beyond their reach. The West intrigued numerous artists and many worked on landscape paintings during Bierstadt's lifetime. Among the most famous of these artists were Thomas Moran and Thomas Hill. Many of these landscape painters took stereoscopic photographs of the area they intended to paint, made field sketches, and, in eastern studios, created their large paintings based off these site images.

Landscape artists were important to the western movement in the mid-1800s due to their representation of the large amounts of land that awaited settlement. In 1862, the Homestead Act enabled any U.S. citizen over twenty-one years of age the ability to claim acreage in the western states for little or no cost. During his career, Bierstadt witnessed and assisted in the mass cultivation of the frontier as a large number of pioneers moved to the shrinking West in the late 19th century and the majority of America's natural land developed into homes, farms, ranches, and mines. The landscapes these artists' dedicated their life's work to no longer existed as the open, natural scenery that had captivated them.

American landscape of the 19th century introduced the nation to what awaited them out west, and, while this westward movement was crucial to the country, ironically, these artists assisted in the demise of their cherished subject. Today these paintings are necessary in discovering the landscapes that no longer exist across this nation.



IMAGES (CLOCKWISE): Thomas Moran, (American, born England, 1837–1926), *The Grand Canyon of the Colorado*, 1913, oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in., Gift of Mrs. C. N. Dietz, 1934.10; Albert Bierstadt, *Rising Mist*, 1874, oil on canvas, On loan from Private Collection, L-2009.9; Thomas Hill, (American, 1829–1952), *Sierra Nevadas*, 1879, oil on canvas, 18 x 30 in., Gift of E. A. Kingman, 1956.333

European Landscapes

Albert Bierstadt's interest in the European landscape began with his training in Germany and lasted throughout his lifetime as he visited varying terrains across the continent. He created the majority of his European work before returning to America and discovering the beauty in the West; however, after western landscapes began to lose popularity in the end of the 19th century, Bierstadt renewed his attention to Europe, creating several paintings of Switzerland and northern Italy.

Bierstadt painted *Storm on the Matterhorn* in New York City in 1886, after one of his frequent trips through Europe. While American western landscapes were Bierstadt's customary subject, he also produced significant paintings of European lands and several works depicting the Swiss Alps. *Storm on the Matterhorn* displays Bierstadt's use of artistic license employed to imagine the dissipating storm viewed from an omniscient angle. It can be inferred that this is a later painting of Bierstadt's due to this license in conjunction with authentic subjects.

Storm on the Matterhorn is representative of Bierstadt's grand, natural style, shown in his presentation of majestic scenery with a balance of natural colors, intricate detail, and intentional white space. The peak of the mountain range towers dramatically above the uneven hillside while storm clouds crowd around the summit's base and float ominously across the background. Trees and plant life conceal the foundation of the glacial mountain. The gloomy presence of the alpine scene is emphasized with a bare tree clinging to life in the left corner and dark thick forests creeping along the mountain's foundation. *Storm on the Matterhorn* is among Bierstadt's greatest paintings of any subject, with its grand presence and subtle detail. An obituary written for the artist mentioned *Matterhorn* as his most important European work.



Albert Bierstadt, *Storm on the Matterhorn*, 1886, oil on canvas, 53 3/4 x 82 1/2 in., Gift of Mrs. Ben Gallagher, 1966.620

Timeline

1830

1830 Albert Bierstadt is born on January 7 in Solingen, Germany

1832 Immigrates to New Bedford, MA



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Albert Bierstadt, *Indian on Horseback*, ca. 1870–80, oil on canvas, 3 1/2 x 7 in., Gift of Norm W. Waitt, Jr., 2014.9.2; Albert Bierstadt's Studio, 1871. Photograph by Eadweard Muybridge.

1848 Gold discovered in California creating a dramatic increase of Americans moving west

1850

1853 Returns to Germany to study art at the Düsseldorf School of Painting; sketching tour through Europe

1850 Places an ad in the local newspaper offering painting lessons

1858 Exhibits at National Academy of Design, New York

1857 Returns to New Bedford

1861 The American Civil War begins in Virginia

1859 Travels west to the Rockies for the first time with a railroad survey

1863 Begins his second journey west, this time to the Pacific Coast and Yosemite Valley

1862 The first Homestead Act signed into law

1865 Builds mansion, Malkasten, in Irvington, NY

1864 Bill declares Yosemite Valley protected as a state preserve

1867 Revisits Europe to exhibit work and create sketches for future paintings

1869 Transcontinental Railroad completed

1871 Travels to California

1873 Returns to New York

1875 Finishes *Discovery of the Hudson* for the United States Capitol

1876 Stays in White House as President Rutherford B. Hayes' guest

1880

1881 Travels to Yellowstone Park for the first time

1882 Malkasten burns down

1886 Displays a room full of paintings at the Industrial Exposition in Minneapolis



1889 Submits *The Last Buffalo* for Paris Exposition of 1889 and *The Landing of Columbus* for World's Columbian Exposition; both rejected

1890

1895 Files for bankruptcy

1900

1902 Dies in New York City on February 18



IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM/BACKGROUND): Albert Bierstadt, *The Trappers, Lake Tahoe*, n.d., oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 27 3/4 in., Gift of Mrs. Harold Gifford, 1961.430; Albert Bierstadt, *Valley of the Yosemite*, ca. 1864, oil on paper on canvas, 14 x 19 in., Gift of Mrs. C. N. Dietz



ALBERT BIERSTADT
American, born Germany, 1830–1902

DAWN AT DONNER LAKE
CA. 1871–1873, OIL ON PAPER MOUNTED ON CANVAS

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Museum purchase, 1934.13