
**Surveyor’s Wagon in the Rockies**, c. 1859, oil on canvas, 7 1/4 x 12 7/8 inches, St. Louis Art Museum, gift of J. Lionberger Davis

Although it is a small sketch, this work should be recognized as one of the talismanic paintings of the West. It probably records the shocking spatial disorientation triggered by seeing the endless plains and mountain ranges of the West for the first time. The wagon, the horses, and the rider are suspended in space somewhere in the open-ended plains. Except for the continuous mountains, there are no markers by which to measure anything—no wagon tracks, hoofprints, bushes, compositional diagonals, or zigzags. The travelers move through a land without leaving a trace and are unable to measure easily the miles they have traversed. There is no possibility of determining the yardage to the grazing animals except by means of atmospheric color; proximity and distance are based on clarity of contour and color alone. Ironically, this, too, is disorienting, since one can see both more and farther in the clear air of wilderness than in the polluted air of towns and cities.

For Bierstadt, the plains were probably impossible to organize into compositional units, a factor that might explain his preference for mountain-valley themes. A generation ago, this type of landscape might have been termed "alienated," since the artist refused to organize and control it. Today we are more interested in process and mechanistic explanations and might call it a "nonstructured" or "nonspatialized" space. This kind of open composition was used later, in the late 1860s and after, in western paintings by Worthington Whittredge and John Kensett; Whittredge traveled west in 1866 and 1870, and Kensett in about 1856-57, 1868, and 1870.

**Thunderstorm in the Rocky Mountains**, 1859, oil on canvas, 19 x 29 inches, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, gift of Mrs. Edward Hall and Mrs. John Carroll Perkins

Another small work, *Thunderstorm* is one of Bierstadt's most important and interesting early western paintings. It is probably the first of his works to be influenced by photography, both in its overall conception and in its details. We know that stereographs and photographs were taken during Bierstadt's first western journey and that his brothers were photographers, but it is not certain that Bierstadt himself actually took pictures. Whether he did is less important than the fact that he had continued access to photographic documentation while painting *Thunderstorm*.

Traditionally, artists had painted landscapes from a slightly elevated point of view as if hovering several feet above ground. Bierstadt completed several in this manner throughout his career. Photographs, however, provided him with at least two alternate modes of pictorial organization. In one type, we seem to stand at ground level or slightly above, to look straight ahead to the base of the mountains (which serve as the horizon line), and then to see the mountains towering above us. This type was probably influenced by the mammoth photographs taken on plates as large as 22 by 25...
inches (56 by 64 cm) by Carleton Watkins and others. Thunderstorm is of another type. In it the landscape--including the mountains--is compressed into the lower part of the canvas. The foreground and the middle and far distances all lie at or below eye level. This seems to have been the way the landscape appeared through the lens of a small camera.

At least four other characteristics of design traceable to photographic sources are evident here. First, there is an apparent laterally expansive foreground that really does not include a vast amount of land. Yet, by comparison, the middle and far distances include enormous amounts of space. Second, the ground at our feet seems to slip beneath us, suggesting the slight peripheral distortions of photographs. Third, boulders in the foreground stand out with three-dimensional clarity, recalling stereographs. Fourth, the dark raw of hills in the middle distance, which are contrasted with the lightly toned distant mountains, might also show photographic influences, since near and far distances were not brought into correct tonal balance until the development of new photographic techniques in 1873. But in Dusseldorf, Hans Gude handled middle-distance hills in this manner. Moreover, such scenes of abrupt dark and light tonal contrast occur frequently on cloudy days. When one is in the wilderness, one is acutely aware of differences, and they help define spatial zones in an otherwise trackless and continuous expanse of hillside and mountain.

The type of organization used in Thunderstorm marked a new and significant compositional format for artists--and might help explain, for instance, the startling close-up lateral expanse of Frederick Church's Niagara (1857)--but it remains a mystery why artists did not exploit it more fully.

Indian Encampment, Shoshone Village, 1860, oil on canvas mounted on board, 24 x 19 inches, New-York Historical Society

Although Bierstadt made probing studies of individual Indians during his travels in the West, he generalized their appearances and activities in his paintings. He placed them, as he placed European peasants in earlier works, in the middle distance so that we witness their presence in a landscape setting rather than focus on their movements. Indian Encampment, then, is the western equivalent of his European genre-ized landscapes and reveals Bierstadt's consistent attitude toward subject matter regardless of its locale. Here, between framing trees (a device he infrequently used), Indians are engaged in seemingly unrelated activities.

At the left, a figure points with a stick. Women in front of the tepee are playing with a dog and perhaps, since dogs were an Indian delicacy, are cooking one inside. To the right, a woman with a papoose follows a man on horseback. The painting, bathed in a golden glow, suggests nostalgia for a previous age when Native Americans were thought to have lived harmoniously with nature. Here they are not wily, wicked, or predatory, but are engaged instead in peaceful domestic industry.

Works such as this are obviously part of the broad western European tradition of Arcadian scenes, but in its American version the tradition assumes a particular complexity and ambivalence. Indian Encampment reveals the nobility of the Indians before their contact with Europeans and subsequent debasement. In time they would disappear, and for many, their disappearance was more important than their existence. Paintings displaying this attitude were both pseudohistorical as well as fantasy-ridden in their reconstruction of Indian life. They undoubtedly provided the public with the images it wanted to see, especially during the years Indians were systematically being driven from their lands. Revealingly, many paintings of Indians of this period lack the documentary qualities of works by George Catlin (1796-1872) and Karl Bodmer (1809-93), painted when there was still ample space for everybody in the American West. These paintings also lack the viciousness of later works by Frederic Remington (1861-1909), done when Indians were being squeezed between new settlers and corporations exploring the mineral wealth of the land.

In comparison with literary efforts, romanticized paintings such as this one might also be considered retardataire; the Indian, noble or otherwise, no longer engaged serious writers after the 1850s, and precise anthropological and linguistic analyses of Indian tribes were already being included in the Pacific railroad reports by that time.

The Bombardment of Fort Sumter, c. 1863, oil on canvas, 26 x 68 inches, Art Collection, Union League of Philadelphia

In October 1861, Bierstadt and Emanuel Leutze, whom he had befriended in Diisseldorf, received a five-day pass from General Winfield Scott to visit Union troops near the Potomac River. (At about the same time, Bierstadt's brothers, Charles and Edward, were in the same area obtaining stereographs and photographs.) As a result of this trip, the artist
Bierstadt first visited the Yosemite Valley in 1863 and subsequently painted it in all seasons, climates, moods, and hours as well as in its several aspects—as a wondrous marvel and a pleasant park bordered by precipitously rising mountains, as an intimate place for a picnic or rest, and as a snow-covered desolate wilderness. He painted it in small and monumental scale, on small and enormous canvases. He was so charmed by the site that one historian has even conjectured that Bierstadt planned his second western trip only after seeing Carleton Watkins’s photographs of the valley in Goupil’s Gallery in New York City in 1862.

This work shows Yosemite as a parklike enclosure, even though the valley floor was still wilderness. Despite threatening skies, the serenity of the view describes Yosemite’s Edenic qualities. (Bierstadt usually preferred wilderness to garden scenes.) In fact, this is one of the artist’s most harmoniously composed Yosemite scenes. The balances between forms and the continuities of movement (for example, from cliff profiles to tree trunks to reflections in the water) are studied more carefully than usual and point to the influence of Watkins. Even though Watkins, as a photographer, had less control over his subjects than a painter would have, he had the breathtaking ability to position his camera so that linkages between units and patterns of surface movement appear obvious and inevitable. He also attempted to restrict the number of forms and details in a scene, a characteristic that has a sympathetic echo in this work.

Yosemite Valley, 1866, oil on canvas, 40 x 60 inches, Collection of Jo Ann and Julian Ganz, Jr.

Once thought to be lost, A Storm, the masterpiece of Bierstadt’s early career, was acquired by the Brooklyn Museum in 1976. Although the space-box format is used, the composition is quite unusual. Generally, Bierstadt balanced his large paintings by setting a central valley or body of water between flanking units of equal strength. But in A Storm, the mountains to the right obviously tower over those on the left, and in place of the standard valley floor and rising mountains, he created a complex sequence of elevations by adding an intermediate level in the foreground. To control the contrasts between solid mountains and open spaces, and between near and far distances, Bierstadt imposed a severe two-dimensional system of patterns that can be traced by following the connecting contours of objects, regardless of their position in depth. For instance, the left edges of the distant mountain in the center are visually continued along the edges of the clump of trees in the center foreground.

A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mt. Rosalie, 1866, oil on canvas, 83 x 142 1/4 inches, Brooklyn Museum

Landscape features and plant life are carefully studied in a manner quite different from the earlier The Rocky Mountains. Bierstadt added highlights in several colors to the large masses and varied the color scheme of the mountains much more subtly and intricately than before. But he also succumbed to his penchant for elaborating fantastic cloud formations...
hovering over the distant mountains, their rococo flourishes not always cohering visually with the generally descriptive style of painting. Nor do these clouds necessarily allow space to appear continuous from the foreground to infinity as in, for example, View of Donner Lake, California.

Bierstadt preferred keeping episodic elements to a minimum, but, consonant with the extravagant nature of A Storm, the results of an Indian hunt can be seen, horses are being chased, and an Indian encampment fills part of the valley. Never again would he paint such a complex and crowded work. A Storm is an attempt to show all at once the incredible beauty of the mountains; the vast western spaces; the phenomenal cloud formations; the variety of trees, bushes, and flowers; and a hint of the life-styles of the original inhabitants. The painting is truly a grand-scale celebration of the American West.

Although Bierstadt had traveled to the West several times in the 1860s and 1870s, he did not visit the Yellowstone area until 1880. Of the varied scenery he saw there, he was most attracted to the geysers and Yellowstone Falls. His finished paintings tended to be medium-sized, indicating that he was not as attracted to the area as Thomas Moran. Or perhaps he chose not to compete with Moran, whose famous Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone was completed in 1872. Bierstadt’s Lower Yellowstone Falls was probably based on his own sketches and the photographs of William Henry Jackson. In his version, Bierstadt provided the falls with greater vertical lift by steepening the diagonals of the canyon and accenting the cliff at the upper right. He also raised the horizon line nearly to the top of the painting, a device used by American painters at least by the 1850s. In the foreground Bierstadt placed a few trees, a device Hans Gude had used in Dusseldorf, to provide a sense of distance between the viewer and the falls.

Except for these few alterations, including the emphasized crossed diagonals in the center and the profile of the lower rocks echoing the contour of the lip of the falls, the painting is an unaffected exercise in realistic depiction. A larger painting, undoubtedly based on this study, is another matter. There, violent contrasts of dark and light throw the foreground trees into theatrical, as opposed to merely dramatic, relief. The cliffs assume a candy-coated quality. Additional and exaggerated amounts of foam lather up from the base of the falls, and the mountain in the distance detracts from the central compositional climax of the falls themselves. Clearly, the smaller study appeals more to our contemporary taste, and it probably appealed to the informed taste of 1881 as well.

Bierstadt was always aware of the importance of the sky in his works and often brought it into active play as a source of illumination and an element of design. He seemed to delight in painting approaching storms, moonlit scenes, or billowy cloud banks. So varied are his skies and so persistently did they assert themselves in his works that it seems impossible and unnecessary to assign influences. He probably absorbed ideas and techniques from whatever sources were available to him throughout his career, including paintings or reproductions of paintings by Andreas Achenbach and Turner as well as the writings of John Ruskin, especially the lengthy section on clouds in the first volume of his Modern Painters, the first American edition of which was published in 1847. The study reproduced here, which is among Bierstadt's more detailed sky scenes, indicates the seriousness with which he studied light sources and cloud formations.


Editor's note: RL readers may also enjoy:

- For Bierstadt’s Eyes Alone, essay by Mary Terence McKay (11/2/02)
- image of Yellowstone Falls from the TFAO photo library.