

The West as Landscape

Landscape painting was very popular in 19th century America and two of the landscapists most identified with the West are Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran. We have an excellent collection of Bierstadt's and one Moran.

The goal of this short introduction is to look the across the sweep of 19th century art history and ask

- **Why landscape painting was so popular,**
- and, focusing on a few paintings, look at **how and why the style changed by the end of the century**

You could say that starting in the early 19th century landscaping painting had become the national American genre.

- Young men, including artists, would go on the Grand Tour of Europe and they were deeply influenced by the monuments, cathedrals, castles and ancient ruins that are our cultural heritage
- Problem was, what would they paint when they came back since we did not have Europe's long tradition of religious or historical painting?
 - But what we did have was **magnificent natural beauty and wilderness**
 - **So scenery became America's cathedrals.**
 - History was encapsulated not in what **man had made and done, but what God had created**
- A lot of European landscapes were very domesticated, with cows and landholdings or ruins showing how man had tamed nature.
 - But American painting was principally done in one of two ways and both showed the strong popular religious underpinnings of the time.
 - **Wilderness and discovery**, where nature is grand and sometimes fearsome or
 - **Accurate botanical and geological knowledge**
 - **The Divine exists both in the microcosm of nature and in its grand vistas.** These paintings had a wonderful spirituality to them
 - But, of course, these paintings also were irresistible to anyone dreaming of a place beyond the drudgery of their daily routine. These vast open spaces could offer excitement and unknown challenges
- Often, they have no figures, but if there are any they are usually small and inconsequential suggesting our own insignificance compared to the grandeur of nature
- This tradition started in the East with the Hudson River School, with which Bierstadt was associated

Alfred Bierstadt (1830-1902)

- An immigrant from Germany, he studied art in America and then returned in 1853 to study their distinct, romantic, naturalistic style and precise German brushwork.
- In 1859 he joined a US Gov't survey of Nebraska Territory to route the transcontinental railroad.
 - Artists were very important on these expeditions since photography was in its infancy. He documented the west in small-scale oil sketches and drawings.
 - He returned to his studio and made his studies into full-size paintings

Island Lake, Wind River Range, 1861, a picturesque and romantic scene, was from this series

- Overall feeling of peace and calm,
- Restrained palette and spirituality
- Use of atmospheric perspective and softness of image
- Subtle hints of detail perhaps imply the fading of the particulars from his memory, but he felt it gave his viewers the same feeling of awe and emotional response that he had for the region when sketching it
 - Since he could evoke this emotional response, he saw the opportunity to capitalize on America's amazement with the unknown western wilderness

He became an entrepreneur who transformed the western wilderness into theater.

- He traveled the East in the 1860's and 70's with huge, often 8'x10' paintings, and sold tickets like an attraction in the P.T. Barnum sideshows.
- The canvas was elaborately framed, installed in a dark room behind luxurious drapes with music and then revealed to thunderous applause
- The works showed exaggeratedly rugged and "scenic" vistas, dramatic clouds, mists, and shadows. A critic said he had a copyright on every western mountain peak

Yellowstone Falls, 1881

This painting gives a sense of his landscape as drama and theater

- Very realistic except maybe for the lower rocks reflecting the lip of the falls
- But it distorts the dramatic darks and lights throwing the foreground trees into an almost theatrical relief
- A vibrant palette, as opposed to *Wind River Range*, thunderous falls, and precipitous rocks, show the awesome side of "what God had created"

Bierstadt was so successful that 1864, at 34, he sold a painting for \$25,000 (about \$500,000) today, but by the end of the century **both the American West and styles and themes in painting had radically changed**

The Last of the Buffalo, 1888

This painting still has the dramatic landscape in the background and is painted in a romantic, dreamy twilight, But it **focuses on the action of an imagined** scene of the Indians hunting buffalo since, by **1888 the frontier had nearly closed.**

- The buffalo were almost extinct
- The Indians were mostly on reservations
- The railroads crisscrossed the country coast to coast
- The settlers had reached the Pacific

In 1889 the jury of the Paris Exposition **rejected this major work, *The Last of the Buffalo* commenting that it was a “history” painting, rather than a landscape**

- It did not reflect poetry or ideas, as did “modern art” but was painted for financial gain and sensational effect – of course he had built his fortune doing this!
- Later it would gain popularity as a nostalgic icon of the “Old West,” celebrating a wilderness that had closed.

To finish with Bierstadt’s life, his popularity and wealth had risen to tremendous heights only to fade by the 1890’s

- His wife died and his mansion burnt with many of his paintings inside
- Changing artistic styles were also conspiring against him
 - Interest in **impressionism** turned public taste away from his highly detailed landscapes suffused with golden light
 - This new image in Western art **focused on people, events and action.** The new icons were cowboys, Indians, mountain men, pioneers and historic figures but **as the artists imagined them to have been** in the “Old West”
- He filed for bankruptcy in 1895 and died mostly forgotten in 1902 at 72 by an audience that had once embraced him as a national treasure.

John Henry Twachtman, *Waterfall in Yellowstone*, ca. 1895

This dramatic painting, so radically different from the other Yellowstone images in this show, is squarely in the Impressionistic school. Its use of color and light and loose brushstrokes evoke the spirit, feeling and power, rather than the realistic detail of this famous waterfall

Note also, at the end of this room, **Remington**, the Cowboy Artist also turned to Impressionism at the end of his life

Touring Thoughts

Adults The comments on the 4 images lead directly into questions that can be used in a discussion with visitors

Children - Landscapes: In most of the 1800's, people lived on farms or in small towns in the East where the land was quite flat or had low hills. Even the great mountains of the East were densely forested. When the artists came back with these paintings of vast open spaces and mountains and great waterfalls and geysers, the few people who saw them had trouble imagining that these places really existed. However, there were no TV or movies or photographs (until the middle of the century) or any other easy way for most to see them. Fairs were popular and the circus would come to town, so when Alfred Bierstadt and Thomas Moran took their paintings on tour in the second half of the century like a circus side-show, many, many people were introduced to the unbelievable western landscape and their wondrous art.

Buffalo: *The Last Buffalo Hunt* (and many other pieces in this exhibit) gives a great opportunity to talk about buffalo and Indians. Here are some interesting facts to use as you talk about what you see in this painting

- The buffalo was central to the life of the central plains Indians. It was the center of their culture, housing and religious beliefs
- When the plains teemed with buffalo, they were never out of sight, touch or smell of some buffalo product. Since there were no stores, the buffalo was their Walmart.
- Problem was, they were huge and dangerous to kill with bows and arrows or spears, and even with rifles that came later.
 - Before a buffalo hunt, the Indians would use ceremonies and prayers to call the buffalos to them and assure a safe, good hunt.
 - If they could kill one, like in this painting, they would use every part of the animal
 - But sometimes, they led huge herds over cliffs and they all were killed. The plains were strewn with them and since they weighed about 2,000 pounds each, the Indians could be very fussy about the parts they ate. They preferred cows over tough bulls and liked humps and tongues the best.
- It was estimated that
 - 30 million roamed the plains in 1880.
 - By 1870 that number was cut in half to 15 million
 - And by 1889 they were largely extinct
 - Today we have about 200,000 in National Parks, preserves and private herds, but none in the wild since the west no longer has enough space.

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