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BIERSTADT AND NATIONALISM

The Hudson River School was established in 1825, when the works of painter Thomas Cole first found an audience in New York. New York mayor Philip Hone remarked,

> "Cole's pictures are admirable representations of that description of scenery which he has studied so well in his native forests. His landscapes are too solid, massy, and umbrageous to please the eye of the amateur accustomed to Italian skies and English park-scenery, but I think every American is bound to prove his love of country by admiring Cole."[1]

The rise of Cole and other Hudson River School painters—as the informal group of artists who worked in and around the New York came to be known—coincided with the birth of American nationalism. Inspired by their success in the Revolution and the War of 1812, the Americans of the early nineteenth century sought to distinguish themselves from Europe; the wilderness of the American landscape, her wide open spaces, imposing mountains and vast fields and valleys separated the New World from the Old and imparted individualism, innocence, and pride. Painter Albert Bierstadt's enormous landscapes of the Rocky Mountains exhibited the grandeur of the American frontier, reflected nationalism, and inspired Westward expansion.

Albert Bierstadt was born in Prussia in 1830 and came to New Bedford, Massachusetts two years later. His biographer Linda S. Ferber notes that, as a youth, "he displayed a business-like probity, application, and master of practical affairs that gave his family ample reason to believe that he would succeed in more remunerative occupations."[2] While Bierstadt pursued photographic endeavors, land mining and speculation, investment, and even invention, he would stake his reputation on his representation of the American West. The drama of Bierstadt's personal history rivals that of his paintings. Through hard work and determination he triumphed

over early adversity as a German immigrant and the son of a cooper, and achieved national recognition as a distinctly American painter. In 1853 Bierstadt traveled to Dusseldorf, the center of the German artistic world, and pursued composition and drawing at the local art academy; a local artist remarked that Bierstadt was "a noble fellow, and one who deserves to succeed, for no one ever worked harder or against more adverse circumstances than he did."[3] Bierstadt did not find success until the early 1860s, however. After several trips out West produced energetic portrayals of the American landscape, Bierstadt's portfolio of small and large paintings finally captivated the public and attracted big patrons.

Albert Bierstadt's evolution from a European-trained artist to a distinctly American painter paralleled the development of America. If the Puritans of the early seventeenth century adopted the Western-European belief that the wilderness or nature were representations of Divine Hell, the Americans of the nineteenth century, although still inspired by European thought, transformed the notion of wilderness to reflect their national identity. By the nineteenth century, that which was once feared became revered. Long before the colonization of the New World and as far back as the Middle Ages, Europeans associated wilderness with hell. Dark forests hosted wild animals and threatened man's survival; the wilderness represented the unknown. It was the very antithesis of ordered, civilized, society. Historian Roderick Nash has traced the evolution of the philosophical understanding of wilderness from biblical to modern times in his classic, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Colonial Americans, Nash writes, were intimidated and challenged by the New World environment. The early pioneers depended on the environment for survival and strived to control it. "Wherever they encountered wild country they viewed it through utilitarian spectacles: trees became lumber, prairies became farms, and canyons provided the sites for hydroelectric farms."[4] If one failed to conquer the wilderness, the

colonists believed, society would be conquered by it. Civilized man faced the danger of succumbing to the wilderness of his surroundings and the savagery of the Native Americans. To diminish this threat and establish society, colonial Americans conquered wilderness and remodeled it in their image. The Puritans sought "to carve a garden from the wilds; to make an island of spiritual light in the surrounding darkness."[5]

While Americans continued to believe that they were destined to conquer and utilize the wild throughout most of the nineteenth century, Enlightenment and Romantic ideas of deism and the sublime, respectively, encouraged Americans to appreciate that which they sought to destroy. Influenced by the Enlightenment era/deist belief that the majestic was divinely inspired (seventeenth century Americans had conflated mountains with warts or pimples) Americans began to project God onto the American landscape. The rise of Romanticism and the notion of the sublime (in the early part of the nineteenth century) broadened the definition of beauty beyond that which was comfortable and well ordered to encompass that which was vast or chaotic. Thus, if the concept of the sublime allowed Americans to appreciate rugged wilderness, deism linked the landscape with the divine. The deists believed that wilderness was the medium "through which God showed His power;" and spiritual truths emerged out of the natural landscape.[6] Romantics idealized and appreciated the wild in its natural form. "Wilderness appealed to those bored or disgusted with man and his works. It not only offered an escape from society but also was an ideal stage for the Romantic individual to exercise the cult that he frequently made of his soul."[7] These European imports inspired the American of the nineteenth century to identify beauty and individualism in the subjects of Bierstadt paintings; the sublime and deism became the building blocks of a unique American identity.

Americans began to admire their natural surroundings in the aftermath of independence; appreciation for the wild began in the more educated urban centers and spread, much like expansion itself, across America. The aftermath of the Revolution, which itself coincided with the rise of Romanticism, inspired the nation to establish unique political, economic, and cultural systems. As Americans attempted to distinguish themselves from Britain, they "sought something uniquely American yet valuable enough to transform embarrassed provincials into proud and confident citizens."[8] Inspired by the ideas of the day, American nationalists actively embraced and touted America's wilderness; if other European nations hosted beautiful natural landscapes, the North American continent, the nationalists argued, possessed the purest and most natural wilderness. In contrast to the man-made and constructed European environment, American wilderness was the creation of God. "America had a distinct moral advantage over Europe…American heritage was more innocent and moral."[9]

Thus it was no accident that America's first unique school of painting reflected the early brands of American national identity. The Hudson River School of painting, along with the poetry and novels of the time, instructed Americans in the superiority and glory of America. Thomas Cole explained that the "American scenery…has features, and glorious ones, unknown to Europe. The most distinctive and perhaps, the most impressive characteristic of American scenery is its wilderness."[10] American artists reflected American ideals. Albert Bierstadt was a third generation Hudson River School painter who worked in the Hudson Valley but ironically did not paint it. Still, Bierstadt's work displayed the themes, principles and philosophy of Thomas Cole and the Hudson River School. In *Different Views in Hudson River School Painting,* Judith Hansen O'Toole observes that the belief that God was reflected in nature, that in painting the landscape one was representing the work of God, and that "the magnificence of nature; and,

specifically, the significance of the fresh, untamed American scenery reflecting our national character, as opposed to the civilized European landscape," unified three generations of Hudson River School painters.[11] Though Albert Bierstadt began his art education in Germany, his magnificent portrayals of the West, which resulted from his excursions across the vast American frontier in the latter half of the nineteenth century, betray a deep commitment to celebrating American wilderness, the sublime, and American nationhood.

Albert Bierstadt did not paint the Rocky Mountains until 1859. In April of that year he joined the survey team of Frederick W. Lander and set out for Saint Joseph, Missouri. Americans had long wished to picture the wilderness of the West; Washington Irving and Richard Henry had described its vastness in their travel books and Bierstadt, who had a good eye for commercially viability and aesthetically pleasing subjects, would provide the illustrations for their popular texts. Bierstadt sketched his subjects on location and painted them, from the numerous sketches he had collected while on the expedition, in the Tenth Street Studio building in New York City -- a club of sorts for all of the Hudson River School painters. He displayed his first paintings of the Rocky Mountains in January of 1860.

The Rocky Mountains, Landers Peak was completed by 1863 and became Bierstadt's most important early landscape. The painting eased nationalistic insecurities, generated nationalism, and served as a lesson in Western topography. If Americans were proud of the West, they were equally intimidated by the peaks of Europe's Alp Mountains; nationalists hoped that the West could match the scenery of the European mountainside and "invested much national pride in the reported alpine character of the Rocky Mountains."[12] In *The Rocky Mountains, Landers Peak* Bierstadt composited various passages, scenes and details from his 1859 journey to meet nationalistic ends. The six-foot-by-ten-foot image revealed Alp-like snow

covered Rocky Mountains in the background, smartly connecting American wilderness to the European sublime, and a settlement of Native Americans in the foreground. If the former provided the viewer with a sense of Romantic wilderness and the sublime, the latter cast the painting in a uniquely American light. According to art historian Barbara Novak, "the Indian, who, as a function of nature, symbolizes its unexplored state… [he] represent[s] nature, not culture."[13] Bierstadt's uninhabited paradise allowed the viewer to marvel at virgin wilderness without intruding on its innocence; the painting's title furnished the mountain with identity and national pride. Bierstadt identified the painting with Frederick W. Lander, the leader of Bierstadt's 1859 tour of the West and a national war hero who had died in March of 1862 while serving in the Union army. In associating his work with a fallen hero, Bierstadt knowingly linked the West with American military service and patriotism. A review in *Harper's Weekly* extended this theme:

> "It is purely an American scene, and from the faithful and elaborate delineation of the Indian village, a form of life now rapidly disappearing from the earth, may be called a historic landscape. It is the curtained continent with its sublime natural forms and its rude savage human life…this work of Bierstadt's inspires the temperate cheerfulness and promise of the region it depicts and the imagination contemplates it as a possible seat of supreme civilization."[14]

The Rocky Mountains, Landers Peak referenced a particular topography and Native American tribe; it educated Americans and inspired them to expand westward.

Eighteen years before Albert Bierstadt unveiled *The Rocky Mountains, Landers Peak,* journalist John L. O'Sullivan advised America to claim the whole of Oregon in her territorial dispute with Great Britain over the future of Oregon Country. "And that claim is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us."[15] O'Sullivan believed that Americans should spread democracy to

the Oregon Country, thus advocating a peaceful expansion. But after 1845, the term was offered as a moral justification for extending American civilization across the North American continent. As wagons, canals, steamboats and railroads propelled Americans westward in the latter half of the nineteenth century, "most Americans believed that it was 'manifest destiny' of the United States to spread across the entire continent."[16] American expansion, like the land onto which they were expanding, was ordained by God; Albert Bierstadt and the American public regarded the virginity and wildness of the American landscape as a symbol of the American spirit and independence. As the great American historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in his classic *The Significance of the Frontier in American History,* "the advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on the American lines."[17] Similarly then, Albert Bierstadt applied European techniques of art and the philosophy of Romanticism and the sublime to the American landscape; Bierstadt adapted his European technique to develop uniquely American art.

Albert Bierstadt took his second expedition of the West Coast in 1863. Accompanied by artist Fitz Hugh Ludlow, who chronicled their journey for the *Atlantic Monthly*, Bierstadt hoped his images could offer hope and the promise of a second Eden to war-torn Americans. Once Bierstadt and Ludlow arrived at Yosemite Valley, Ludlow proclaimed it "a new heaven and a new earth into which the creative spirit had just been breathed…Never were words so beggard for an abridged translation of any Scripture of Nature."[18] If *The Rocky Mountains, Landers Peak* attempted to offer an American the equivalent to European sublime, then Bierstadt's paintings of the Yosemite Valley expressed "a national landscape for which there was no equivalent."[19] *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California* was finished and unveiled in New York in 1865; it provided Americans with a refuge from war and promoted California to other artists, tourists and

settlers. The painting captures the grandeur of the valley and depicts its subject accurately, if only, melodramatically. The light of the sun elevates an ordinary valley to the sublime and manifests the presence of the divine. In linking Western wilderness with God, Bierstadt inspired nationalism and reawakened a sense of American moral supremacy and innocence; after all, God was on their side. The continent was theirs to conquer.

From June 1867 until 1869, Albert Bierstadt and his wife traveled around Europe. Success followed them; his paintings sold for $25,000 to $35,000 dollars and he was commissioned to paint scenes for European patrons. In December of 1867, the British royal family invited Bierstadt to exhibit his work and pronounced him "court painter"—no other Hudson School Painter ever attained such prominence. But if Europeans admired Bierstadt's talents, beginning in the late 1860s, his works began to generate mixed reviews in the United States. *The Domes of Yosemite*, for instance, "sparked a heated battle among [American] critics."[20] Some ridiculed the work as sensationalist, unrealistic, inaccurate, manipulative and orchestrated. They charged that Bierstadt's melodramatic representation of a mountain and the clear sky manipulated the viewer and evoked emotion. One critic, Mark Twain, disagreed. He wrote "snow peaks-are correct—they look natural; the valley is correct and natural; the pine trees clinging to the bluff on the right and the grove on the left, and the boulders are all like natural."[21] Still, Bierstadt's composites—his 1868 painting, *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* was completed in Rome and consisted entirely of a composite of elements from earlier works—were increasingly rejected by American art critics.

Beginning in the late 1860s and until his sudden death in 1902, Bierstadt's composites preserved the myth of Western virginity even as American migration westward devirginized the landscape. His *Donner Lake from the Summit (1873)* attempted to balance westward expansion

with uncultivated landscape; his representation of a railroad, a symbol of late nineteenth century civilization, as a mere puff of smoke in the sublime landscape struggled to preserve the image of the American wilderness. But if Bierstadt could minimize the representation of westward migration in his paintings, he could not stop the feverish pitch at which Americans spread across the continent.

As western expansion confronted Native Americans, America's belief in Manifest Destiny, cultural superiority, and innocence trumped Indian culture and civilization. While the work of Albert Bierstadt did not directly promote the destruction of native traditions, his paintings popularized and idealized the West in the American psyche. Bierstadt's grand representations of the Rocky Mountains and the Yosemite Valley served as advertisements for Westward migration. Ironically, Bierstadt's career paralleled the downward trajectory of the wilderness he glorified.

By the end of the nineteenth century Albert Bierstadt's contribution to the American national identity was all but forgotten. His penchant for self promotion and melodramatic subject matter were ultimately rejected by a public weary of war, and attracted to the new Impressionist art developing in Europe. If his fame elapsed by decade's end, his work served to inform and galvanize American nationalism in the decade prior. According to Nancy K Anderson's and Linda S. Ferber's valuable *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, *The Last of the Buffalo,* Bierstadt's last major work, "is one of Bierstadt's most remarkable paintings, for like the 'wondrous inventions' of the 1860s, it is a masterfully conceived fiction that addressed contemporary issues."[22] The painting, which was rejected for exhibition by the Exposition Universelle in Paris, shows a Native American on a horse attacking a buffalo; it celebrates the America Bierstadt's work had encouraged, inspired and motivated Americans to conquer. The

painting's title, however, condemns such destruction. Mass buffalo killings began in the 1870s when buffalo hide became fashionable, and army officers discovered that killing the animals was an effective way of subduing Native Americans. Albert Bierstadt had spent a lifetime profiting from the vastness of the Western landscape. If he lamented the consequences of American expansion, he was in no position to manage or limit Americans' attempts to conquer the North American continent.

Footnotes and References

[1] "The Hudson River and Its Painters" (John K. Howat) pg. 29
[2] "Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise" (Anderson and Ferber) pg. 22
[3] Ibid. pg. 23
[4] "The Wilderness in the American Mind" (Roderick Nash) pg. 22
[5] Ibid. pg. 35
[6] Ibid. pg. 46
[7] Ibid. pg. 47
[8] Ibid. pg. 67
[9] Ibid. pg. 64
[10] Ibid. pg. 81
[11] "Different Views in the Hudson School Painting" (Judith Hansen O'Toole) pg. 11
[12] "Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise" (Anderson and Ferber) pg. 72
[13] "Nature and Culture" (Barbara Novak) pg. 189
[14] Ibid. pg. 75
[15] "America: A Narrative History" (Tindall & Shi) pg. 585
[16] Ibid. pg. 444
[17] "The Frontier in American History" (Frederick Jackson Turner) pg. 6
[18] "Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise" (Anderson and Ferber) pg. 81
[19] Ibid. pg. 85
[20] Ibid. pg. 91
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid. 101