



MONTANA TRAILS GALLERY

Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902)

Likely the most famous and financially successful late 19th-century painter of the American western landscape, Albert Bierstadt created grandiose, dramatic scenes of the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevadas that lured many people to visit those sites. He was also one of the first artists to use a camera to record landscape views.

His oil paintings, many of them huge, were the ultimate expression of the popular 19th-century Romanticism. But his reputation diminished when public taste in art changed dramatically and replaced Realism and Romanticism with Impressionism and when transcontinental railway travel revealed that the West looked nothing like his idealized paintings.

Bierstadt was born in Solingen, near Dusseldorf, Germany, and sailed as a baby with his family who settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Unlike many of his successful peers, as a child, he showed only casual interest in and talent for art, and he had little encouragement from his family. In New Bedford, he acquired a few collectors of his early work including a Mrs. Hathaway from a local shipping family. At a New Bedford Concert Hall, he also used the floral images of George Harvey (1800-1878) for a scenery picture shows with a Drummond Light, a lantern that allowed one picture to fade into another.

In 1853, he returned to Dusseldorf where he studied at the Royal Academy with landscape painters Andreas Aschenbach and Karl Friedman Lessing. Some of his fellow students were Emmanuel Leutze, Sanford Gifford and Worthington Whittredge, and they all learned much attention to detail, respect for composition and skilled drawing. During this period, he traveled extensively in Europe, especially Italy, and



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companions were Whittredge and Gifford. He completed many picturesque Old World scenes in the style that later became his trademark.

In 1857, he returned to the United States and painted the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and in 1858, exhibited for the first time at the National Academy of Design in New York. His fourteen entries included, *Lake Lucerne*, which was one of the biggest in the exhibition. That same year, representatives of the Boston Atheneum, purchased his painting, *The Portico of Octavia, Rome*, for \$400.00 and this was the first museum purchase acquisition of his work.

In January 1859, he heard a lecture in New Bedford on the American West by Bayard Taylor, famous traveler and lecturer, and this exposure stirred an interest that played a large part in his future career. Meanwhile, he had settled into New York City where he lived and occupied a studio in the Tenth Street Building, which had 25 studio spaces and became well known for its prestigious occupants. He remained in this studio space until 1881, when he moved to 1271 Broadway to the Rensselaier Building.

A year later he found the subject matter that set the course of his career. He joined a western military expedition led by Colonel Frederick W. Lander to survey wagon routes in the Rocky Mountains and Wyoming. From sketches and artifacts such as buffalo hides and Indian items, he painted studio western scenes including landscapes, Indians, and wildlife in the traditional style he had learned in Europe. His first big western painting, 1860, had several titles: *The Base of the Rocky Mountains*, *Laramie Peak* and/or *The Rocky Mountains*. (It should not be confused with the 1863 painting, *The Rocky Mountains*, now in the Metropolitan Museum.) The 1860 painting did not generated much reaction when it was exhibited at the National Academy nor did it find a buyer, but it did establish "its creator, however, as the artistic spokesman of the American Far West" . . . (Hendricks 94) Subsequently the painting was lost, having been loaned to a Buffalo New York high school in 1922.



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In 1861, Bierstadt and his friend from Dusseldorf, Emanuel Leutze, got permission to visit army camps around Washington to paint Civil War scenes, and from this experience plus an 1863 visit to Fort Sumter, Bierstadt painted war theme canvases including *The Bombardment of Fort Sumter*. During this period, he also visited the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and made plans for a second visit to the American West, which involved securing welcomes at U.S. army forts by getting travel permission from Charles Sumner, Secretary of War.

This second trip West was with his friend, Fitz Hugh Ludlow, whose wife Rosalie Osborne, Bierstadt would subsequently marry in circumstances that 'titillated' New York society. Ludlow was the son of a Presbyterian abolitionist minister of Poughkeepsie, New York, and was a writer of a controversial but best-selling book, *The Hasheesn Eater*. The publication was praising of hashish and described his positive experiences of being one of the first westerners to use the drug, which had been used in India and other countries for over a thousand years but was first introduced in 1839 in America. As a result of notoriety for the book, by the mid 1850s, he was highly prominent in New York society. He was married to Rosalie Osborne of wealthy family of Waterville, New York, It has been suggested that Rosalie and Bierstadt were showing interest in each other at the time of the 1863 western trip of the two men.

In 1863, with the understanding that Ludlow would take copious notes for a book to be published and possibly with the idea they would come to some conclusion about Rosalie, Ludlow and Bierstadt set off from New York in April 1863 from Atchison, Kansas. There they got supplies and in late May the men left on the Overland Trail through Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada and into California by July 17. Painters Virgil Williams and Enoch Wood Perry joined them in San Francisco for a painting excursion to Yosemite during the month of August. They camped in a meadow on the Merced River and near the base of Yosemite Falls, and were back in San Francisco by mid September. Then they journeyed to Oregon, leaving from Portland to catch a steamer from San Francisco that returned them to New York on



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December 17, 1863. During this time, Bierstadt's name came up for draft into Civil War service, but he paid an exemption of \$300.

Three years later, the Ludlows were divorced, and Rosalie Ludlow married Albert Bierstadt. From the time of his trip with Bierstadt, Fitz Hugh Ludlow had deteriorated mentally and physically. Allegedly he was abusive to Rosalie, indulged in excessive alcohol and hashish, and decamped to Saint Joseph, Missouri with another woman. He died in Switzerland in June 1870, having married a widow from Maine.

For Bierstadt, the Yosemite paintings were such a sensation that he became immediately famous. In 1871, he returned to California and stayed for three years, exhibiting in local galleries and with the San Francisco Art Association. He also returned in 1893 after the death of his wife.

In 1865, he built a thirty-five room home of granite and wood on the Hudson River near New York City. He named the place "Malkasten," which was German for paint box and referred to the name of an artists' gathering and exhibition place in Dusseldorf during his student days. However, he seldom worked from his home, preferring his New York City studio. On November 10, 1882, "Malkasten" with many of his paintings was destroyed by fire.

In the 1860s and 70s, he earned the highest prices ever achieved by an American painter, and the US Congress allotted \$20,000 for one of his paintings. In 1867, he had a grand tour of Europe and England including a special audience with Queen Victoria. His painting, *Among the Sierra Mountains, California*, was exhibited at the Royal Academy of London with mixed reactions as some thought it overtaxed the viewers' minds and imaginations. He received the Chevalier of the Legion of Honor by Napoleon III and the Order of the Stanislaus from the Czar of the Russias.

Returning to America, the Bierstadt's visited his photographer brother, Charles, and her sister, Esther, in Niagara Falls, and also went to New



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Hampshire for more painting in the White Mountains. In 1871, the Bierstadt's went to California, staying for two and a half years. They stayed primarily in San Francisco, and were much sought after socially. He painted in the Sierra Nevadas, Lake Tahoe and Yosemite, and Colis Huntington and Leland Stanford, two of California's most prominent businessmen, bought paintings from him.

However, toward the end of the century, beginning in the 1870s, his career had major setbacks with the increasing influence of the Barbizon and Impressionist styles from Europe. Bierstadt's painting style was increasingly considered old fashioned and foolishly romantic. However, he was asked to contribute a painting to the newly established Pennsylvania Academy, and sent *Mount Adams, Rocky Mountains*. He also received a commission for paintings for the U.S. Capitol Building and contributed historical scenes, *Landing in Monterey* and *Discovery of the Hudson*. He also entered work in the Philadelphia Exposition of 1875, but the public's reaction was less than enthusiastic.

For income and because of lack of interest in living there, the Bierstadt's rented Malkasten, their home on the Hudson River. He took a studio and housing space in the Rensselaer Building at 1271 Broadway, and there held exhibitions for sales of his paintings in circumstances described as elegant and commodious. The couple traveled in Canada and Colorado, but Rosalie, who had tuberculosis, spent much time in Nassau, where the climate was better for her health. He did paintings there, and in 1875, returned to California. From 1878 to 1879, the Bierstadts traveled in Europe, and then she was in the Bahamas for eight months while he again traveled west including to Yellowstone and Salt Lake City. The next few years they both traveled together some, including a return to Europe, but she spent increasing time in Nassau, and he took several more trips including to Canada, Alaska and Europe.

He was very disappointed when his entry, *The Last of the Buffalo*, (now at the Corcoran Gallery) was rejected for the Paris Exposition of 1889. However, this canvas did have the consequence of stimulating an



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official census of the buffalo population, which was estimated to be 60 million at the time Columbus discovered America and was down to about 500 when Bierstadt did his painting. Resulting from the census was a plan of government protection.

On March 1, 1893, Rosalie Bierstadt died. She was fifty-two years old, and although she had been ill for the last years of their marriage, had reportedly been a much-loved companion of her husband. A year later, he married Mary Hicks Stewart, widow of David Stewart, a Boston banker and father, by an earlier marriage, of Isabella Stewart Gardner, prominent art collector. Reportedly this marriage was happy, and for a wedding gift, Albert gave her his historical painting, *Landing of Columbus*, which after his death, she gave to the Museum of Natural History in Washington DC.

The couple lived in New York at 322 Fifth Avenue, and he kept a fairly regular schedule of painting, although the popularity of his work declined. They traveled to Europe several times, and were entertained by Queen Victoria on the Isle of Wight.

Although his wife was wealthy, they kept their finances separate, and in 1895, he declared bankruptcy. Seven years later, on February 18, 1902, he died in New York City, having just returned from a walk. His body is buried beside his parents in the Rural Cemetery of New Bedford, Massachusetts.

For several decades after his death, he was largely forgotten in the public mind. But he has been rediscovered in the late 20th century and stirred interest in many collectors, especially his paintings of the American West.