

Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California, 1865

In a time when few Americans had ventured west of the Mississippi, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California* offered a welcome view of one of the natural wonders on the far side of the continent. After his first trip to the American West in 1859, Albert Bierstadt produced a sequence of landscape paintings that proved so popular with East Coast audiences that he was eager to return to paint more. The onset of the Civil War postponed his trip, but in 1863 Bierstadt set off from Philadelphia to make the transcontinental journey by train, by stagecoach, and on horseback. When he finally reached California, the landscape surpassed his expectations. Born and educated in Germany, Bierstadt was well-acquainted with the beauty of the Alps; but nowhere in Europe, he maintained, “is there scenery whose grandeur can for one moment be held comparable with that of the Sierra Nevada in the Yosemite District.” *Looking Down Yosemite Valley* supports that nationalistic claim and expresses the artist’s own sense of wonder at his first sight of the majestic mountain landscape.

Bierstadt’s exceptionally large canvas (five by eight feet) and panoramic view down the valley (twenty to thirty miles) were calculated to draw the viewer into the picture to enjoy the spectacle themselves. Some contemporary critics objected to these sensational devices, arguing that Bierstadt’s methods made the picture look more like stage scenery than fine art—but this may in fact have been the desired effect. Bierstadt introduces no actors into his scene—not a single traveler, trapper, settler, or American Indian—and at the center of the composition, where we expect to find a dramatic climax to the action, there is only vacant space bathed in a golden light that breaks through the clouds. In Bierstadt’s scenario, the

viewer takes the artist’s point of view and discovers that before so magnificent a landscape, human beings dwindle to insignificance.

Yosemite had been isolated by its geography until just before mid-century, when the 1848 California Gold Rush brought a surge of non-indigenous people to the Sierras and the valley was “discovered.” Americans were intrigued by the long-hidden valley, and Bierstadt satisfied their curiosity by documenting its major landmarks—the exposed granite block of El Capitán on the north side (the right of the canvas), opposite the spire of Sentinel Rock and masses of Cathedral Rocks—yet he exaggerates even their imposing proportions. The golden haze that Bierstadt used to soften the edges of the magnificent cliffs may be meant to excuse his creative manipulation of the truth. As one San Francisco critic observed in 1865, “It looks as if it was painted in an El Dorado, in a distant land of gold; heard of in song and story; dreamed of but never seen.”

Bierstadt possessed an uncanny understanding of what Americans in his time wanted to believe was waiting for them on the western frontier: a Garden of Eden blessed by God, untouched by civil war, and holding the promise of a new beginning. His romantic paintings embody the collective hope that a remote landscape could heal a nation’s wounds. The preservationist (and Sierra Club founder) John Muir, Bierstadt’s near-contemporary, affirmed the idea that the Yosemite Valley could refresh the spirit: “The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy,” he promised prospective tourists, “while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.”

Looking Down Yosemite Valley would have been underway in Bierstadt’s New York studio in 1864, when Abraham Lincoln set the territory aside as a state park. This was the first time the federal government had saved a tract of scenic land from development. But when the Transcontinental Railroad was completed five years later, the region was flooded with tourists who wanted to see for themselves the wondrous places they knew only from paintings and photographs. Returning to Yosemite in 1872, Bierstadt lamented the loss of the unspoiled wilderness he had portrayed only a few years earlier.



8-A Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California*, 1865. Oil on canvas, 64½ x 96½ in. (163.83 x 245.11 cm.). Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Ala., Gift of the Birmingham Public Library.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to examine all the elements of this landscape.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E | M

Where do you see trees reflected in water? *It is in the center of the painting.*

E | M

Describe the texture of the rocks. *The rocks appear rough or weathered.*

E | M | S

Tell students to write three or four words that they think of when they first see this painting. Have each student in turn say one of the words that they wrote that another student hasn't offered so far. Write each word on the board or large paper. Encourage students to explain what made them think of this word. Notice how many times words that refer to size and grandeur are mentioned.

E | M | S

If a person were standing in the middle of this scene, about how large would he or she seem? Compare a six-foot tall person to one of the trees; imagine how this person would feel in comparison to these mountains. How might he or she describe this scene?

E | M | S

How has Bierstadt created an illusion of great distance or depth?

He made objects in the foreground darker, more detailed, and larger than distant ones. This approach is called aerial perspective.

M | S

Ask students what they see first when they look at this painting.

Students may see the light area in the middle of the scene.

How does this light add to the drama of this scene?

The light creates dark shadows that dramatically contrast with the light, shining areas.

M | S

On a map, locate Yosemite National Park. Have students compare photographs of Yosemite Valley with Bierstadt's painting to understand how he exaggerated the size of the rock formations. (Photographs of this scene are on the Internet.) Ask students to consider if the sun in the painting is rising or setting. (Consult a map for the orientation of the rock formations—in the painting Cathedral Spires and Sentinel Rock are on the left and El Capitán is on the right.)

INTERPRET

M | S

Bierstadt painted some of the rock formations in this painting taller than they really were. Ask students if they think this exaggeration was dishonest. Have them explain why they do or do not believe that it is all right for an artist to exaggerate features in a scene like this.

In addition to exaggerating the size of the rocks, how else did Bierstadt make the West seem even grander than it was?

He bathed this scene in a golden, glowing light.

S

Ask students what national event America was recovering from in 1865, when this scene was painted.

It was the Civil War.

Why did a scene like this offer hope to Americans?

Not only was it peaceful to look at, but also it reminded them of the Western frontier, spacious, beautiful country waiting to be settled. Many saw the West as the promise of a new beginning.

S

Ask students to explain the role Bierstadt's paintings played in the development of tourism to the West.

When people in the East saw Bierstadt's grand interpretation of western scenery, they wanted to see it for themselves.

Within a few years, with the introduction of the railroad into this area, great numbers of tourists were able to visit Yosemite.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: conservation movement; national parks; Westward Expansion

Historical Figures: Theodore Roosevelt; John Muir

Geography: Yosemite Valley; Sierra Nevada

Science: ecology; conservation; geology

Literary Connections and Primary Documents

Documents: *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson (secondary); *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, John Muir (middle, secondary)

Arts: Hudson River School; compare with the works of Frederic Church