



School &
Teacher
Programs

Albert Bierstadt
American, 1830–1902
In the Mountains, 1867
Oil on canvas
36 3/16 x 50 in.
Gift of John Junius Morgan in memory of his
mother Juliet Pierpont Morgan, 1923.253

Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art

TEACHER RESOURCE

Albert Bierstadt (American, 1830–1902), *In the Mountains*, 1867



The Hudson River School (1825–75)

Under its acknowledged founder, the artist **Thomas Cole (1801–1848)**, the group of American painters who turned to the majestic landscape as a source of inspiration became known as the Hudson River School. This first **school** of painting in America marked a decided shift away from the emphasis on portraiture of the previous century. The wilderness was now considered to be a symbol of the young nation's potential—an artistic vehicle with which to define a national identity. The artists associated with the Hudson River School depicted the wonders of the American wilderness to emphasize its grandeur and **sublime** beauty. Their initial subjects included the Hudson River, Catskills Mountains, Niagara Falls, and White Mountains. The discovery, exploration, and settlement of the land became their subject matter, rendered in a realistic, detailed style. As the wilderness gave way to an urban-based society, these artists symbolically revealed the changing relationship between man and nature through the elimination of signs of the booming tourism and industrialization occurring across the nation. Their manipulated portrayals of American scenery sought instead to convey the Edenic purity of the New World.



By the mid-1850s some American landscape painters developed new aesthetic concerns. Motivated by the latest scientific research in the field of geology, artists such as Hartford native **Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900)** traveled to South America, Jamaica, Labrador (northern Canada), and the Near East in search of new inspiration. The widespread expansionist belief in **Manifest Destiny** fueled the rapid settlement of the American West, where geographical surveys led by explorers encouraged artists such as Albert Bierstadt to join numerous expeditions to observe nature directly. The oil sketches created during these expeditions served as reference tools for artists as they returned to their studios, where they produced naturalistic, scientifically accurate works often in the form of grand **panoramic compositions**. Paintings such as those by Bierstadt were publically exhibited to promote western settlement and the rising national park movement.

During the period of reconstruction following the Civil War, the market for grand depictions of western landscapes declined. In addition, with the extension of the country’s railroad lines, citizens across the nation could now view the “Wild West” for themselves. The advent of photography soon eclipsed painting as the medium for capturing the true character of a subject, furthering the waning interest in realistic painterly depictions of the American frontier. By the end of the nineteenth century, with the shift from an agrarian to an urban-based society and the official end of the era of continental exploration, scenes of modern life replaced **landscapes** as a way to explore and define a national identity.

Hudson River School Paintings at the Wadsworth Atheneum

The core of the museum’s collection of Hudson River School paintings was formed by two major patrons who lived in Hartford. **Daniel Wadsworth (1771–1848)**, founder of the Wadsworth Atheneum, was the primary patron of Cole and later nurtured the career of Church. His lifelong relationships with leading members of this artistic movement enabled him to assemble one of the earliest and finest private collections in the country. Similarly, **Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt (1826–1905)**, widow of the arms manufacturer Samuel Colt, whose factory was based in Hartford, commissioned works by Hudson River School artists, notably Church, for her personal picture gallery. Thanks to the patronage of Wadsworth and Colt, the museum’s collection encompasses two generations of Hudson River School painters, including several important works by Bierstadt.

About the Artist: Albert Bierstadt (American, 1830–1902)

A leading figure in the second generation of Hudson River School painters, Albert Bierstadt became famous for his dramatic depictions of the American West. Characterized by their large scale, romantic lighting, and detailed renderings conveying the majesty of nature, his panoramic views of the American frontier played a decisive role in defining the nation’s identity and conveying its endless potential.

At the age of two, Bierstadt and his family emigrated from Solingen, Prussia (now Germany), to New Bedford, Massachusetts. Without the financial means and familial support to foster his artistic ambition, he taught himself how to draw and paint. By the early 1850s Bierstadt officially entered the professional art world. Working directly with a **daguerreotypist**, he produced theatrical presentations of American scenery—an experience that spawned his lifelong interest in photography. After achieving financial security, he returned to Europe in 1853 to receive formal artistic training at the **Düsseldorf Art Academy**.



While overseas, Bierstadt traveled extensively with American colleagues as well as German painters, all of whom influenced his mature body of work. Returning to Massachusetts in 1857, he exhibited his paintings based on his European sketches, which garnered him national attention. His later expeditions to the West ultimately shifted his subject matter to strictly American scenery.

Joining a United States government survey expedition in 1859, Bierstadt traversed the Rocky Mountains in the territories of Colorado and Wyoming seeking inspiration for a series of large landscape paintings. Not far removed from his days in Europe, he noted,

“The mountains are very fine; as seen from the plains, they resemble very much the Bernese Alps, one of the finest ranges in Europe, if not the world. . . a scene which every lover of landscape would gaze upon with unqualified delight.”

Although Bierstadt was not the first artist to sketch **en plein air** in the Rocky Mountains, his depictions of the American West—infused with the resplendence of the European Alps—caught the attention of the newly created middle class in America and England.

Upon his return to New York City, Bierstadt moved into the **Tenth Street Studio Building**, the well-known workplace of many Hudson River School artists. There his status as America’s leading painter of western scenery was quickly confirmed with the success of his paintings of the Rockies. Bierstadt would later be known for his Yosemite Valley series, now widely considered the high point of his distinguished career.

Bierstadt enjoyed a long period of prosperity in the 1860s, but his artistic reputation declined in the post–Civil War era. Although his work would later be appreciated for its innovation and grandeur, both he and his long-time rival Church experienced a significant loss in demand as their audience shifted their focus to new artistic styles. Today he is remembered as one of the most prolific and internationally recognized American artists of the nineteenth century.

About the Painting: *In the Mountains*, 1867

In an effort to establish an international reputation, Bierstadt traveled to Rome, London, and Paris in June of 1867 in search of new artistic commissions. Scholars believe *In the Mountains* was executed either just before this trip or shortly after the artist arrived in Europe. The painting is a smaller version of a larger canvas used to promote Bierstadt’s artistic talents on his European tour. The silvery tones, dense concentration of trees at right, reflections of the majestic snowcapped mountains on the water, and billowing storm clouds imbue the scene with a serene, spiritual quality.

Originally titled *Yosemite Valley*, the painting was renamed after scholars were unable to identify the exact location of the site depicted and speculated that the mountains resembled the Sierra Nevadas or the Rockies. In actuality, Bierstadt painted the work as a **composite** landscape, drawing upon various topographical sketches that he made during his extensive travels across Europe and America. Rather than producing a faithful depiction of the western frontier, Bierstadt chose to capture the essence of the American landscape through mood and emotion. Seeking to heighten the splendor of the American West, he included picturesque



mountains that scholars believe were directly inspired by the Swiss Alps. While some critics chided Bierstadt for not producing a more faithful portrayal of the western landscape, others praised him for his “power of combination . . . an ideal union of the most splendid and characteristic features of our western mountains . . . a perfect type of the American idea of what our scenery ought to be if it is not so in reality.”

Classroom Activities

Quick Curriculum Connections

History: Nineteenth-Century America

- The American Frontier
- Manifest Destiny and Westward Expansion

Language Arts: **Romanticism** and **Transcendentalism**, including such writers as Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Ralph Waldo Emerson

Science: Geology, Scientific Expeditions, Topography, and Weather

Social Sciences: Defining a National Identity

Visual Arts: Composite Painting, Plein Air Sketching, Landscape, Light, Panoramas, **Realism**, Self-Taught Artists, Space (**Background**, **Middle Ground**, and **Foreground**), and **Texture**

Questions for Guided Looking

Investigate this work of art through a classroom dialogue. Begin by asking students questions that elicit descriptive and objective observations. Move toward more abstract and subjective questions that develop students’ critical thinking skills as they seek to interpret the painting. Be sure that students cite visual evidence for their responses. Always encourage them to explore the painting visually before you reveal any information about it.

Adapt the following questions to your students’ level of comprehension.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Ask each student in the classroom to name one thing that he or she sees in the painting until all observations have been collected. No repeats, if possible. Write students’ responses on a chalk or white board. Discover associations between your findings and explore the skill of categorizing by grouping similar responses together. Consider creating a word web for visual impact.

Ask students to “jump” into the painting. How does the grass feel beneath your feet? What temperature is the mountain air? What do you smell? What do you hear? Encourage students to investigate the painting using their five senses.

How far away is the mountain in the painting? How long would it take you to walk there? Explore how the artist created a sense of space by asking students to describe in detail the elements in the foreground, middle ground, and background of the scene.

What colors did the artist use? Are they cool or warm tones? What mood or feelings do these colors convey?

Where does your eye go first? What objects take up the most space on the canvas? How does the artist draw your attention to certain areas of the painting? To what effect?

Take a look at the painting from left to right, top to bottom. What changes to you see across the canvas?



How did the artist use light? Is one part of the canvas lit more than another?

Look up to the clouds in the sky. What size are they? What lines, colors, and shapes did the artist employ?

Describe the weather in this scene. How does it make you feel? What would you do outside on a day like this one? Would you relax in the shade or run in the grass?

DIGGING DEEPER

What message(s) does the artist convey by choosing to paint the scene in this particular style?

What do you think the artist's attitude toward nature was? How can you tell? How does the painting make you feel about nature?

Bierstadt carefully constructed the composition by combining several sketches of various outdoor landscapes. Given this knowledge, do you consider it a faithful portrayal of nature? With its inclusion of European geographical features, does the painting accurately represent America? Do you consider it an *American* landscape? What makes it American?

If you were to create an image that represented America's potential, what would it look like? Would it be a landscape painting? A portrait? A narrative scene?

Do you think the storm clouds are approaching or passing? How does the active weather pattern depicted in the painting relate to Bierstadt's message about the potential of American society? What might the artist be saying about the country's future?

How do the visual qualities of the painting demonstrate Bierstadt's interest in promoting western settlement and the national park movement?

How might Bierstadt's study and practice of photography have influenced his style, as demonstrated in the painting?

The artist painted a panoramic view of the scene. How would the painting and its meaning be different if Bierstadt had focused on a smaller section of the landscape?

Would this painting be different if the artist had included figures? How does the painting feel without the presence of a human figure? What might the artist be saying by this omission?

These *Digging Deeper* questions may also function as essay prompts for students in both middle and high school.

Literary Links

*As another source of inspiration, Hudson River School artists turned to **Romanticism**, which stressed the awe inherent in nature. Contemporary American writers of the time, such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Benjamin Silliman, endorsed passion and respect for the natural world in their prose. Study the quotations below by these and other famous literary figures of the nineteenth century. How do the quotations relate to what you see in the painting and to common themes promoted by the Hudson River School artists?*



“National character often receives its peculiar cast from natural scenery. . . . Thus natural scenery is intimately connected with taste, moral feeling, utility, and instruction.”

—Benjamin Silliman, writer and geologist

“How willingly we would. . . suffer nature to entrance us. The tempered light of the woods is like a perpetual morning, and is stimulating and heroic. The anciently reported spells of these places creep on us. The stems of pines, hemlocks, and oaks, almost gleam like iron on the excited eye. The incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them, and quiet our life of solemn trifles. . . . How easily we might walk onward into the open landscape, absorbed by new pictures, and by thoughts fast succeeding each other, until by degrees the recollection of home was crowded out of the mind . . . we are led in triumph by nature.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” 1884

“‘Always, after supper, take a walk half a mile long,’ says an old proverb, dryly adding, ‘and if convenient let it be upon your own land.’ I wonder does any other nation but ours afford opportunity for such a jaunt as this? Indeed, has any previous period afforded it? No one, I discover, begins to know the real geographic, democratic, indissoluble American Union in the present, or suspect it in the future, until he explores these central States, and swells awhile observantly on their prairies, or amid their busy towns, and the mighty father of waters. A ride of two or three thousand miles, ‘on one’s own land,’ with hardly a disconnection, could certainly be had in no other place than the United States.”

—Walt Whitman, “Upon Our Own Land,” 1892

These exercises may also function as essay prompts for high school students.

Writing Activities

Many of the skills acquired through the process of carefully looking at works of art are those needed by thoughtful writers. In fact, observation forms the foundation of good writing. Before beginning these activities, be sure to take time to look at the painting with the students. Then use the exercises below to explore how art can serve as a catalyst for the development of students’ writing skills in the areas of description, persuasion, and creative expression.

YOUR JOURNEY TO THE WEST

Explain to students that expeditionary trips to the West were popular during the nineteenth century, as individuals sought wealth, new scientific findings, and artistic inspiration. While looking at the painting, ask students to imagine that they are now on their own journey to this part of the country. Brainstorm using the following questions to get students to articulate in detail what this experience is like. The Bierstadt painting should be the springboard for their responses.

Why are you going on this journey?

What have you encountered? Other travelers? Animals? Sickness? Danger?

What supplies have you brought with you? Are you clean or dirty?



What do you do for food and other nourishment?

Do you have shelter? Where are you sleeping? How many hours of sleep are you getting?

How many miles do you travel each day?

How do you travel across the land? Do you have a compass or a map?

Who is leading your group? How many people are in your party?

What has the weather been like?

What has your general mood been during this journey?

Where is your final destination? How many days until you reach it? What will you and your party do upon arrival?

Once all questions have been discussed, ask students to describe in writing their expedition out West for an article in next month's *Outdoorsman*, a national magazine. Encourage students to use their imaginations as they expand upon their answers to the questions above and the visual evidence they have found in the painting. To spark their imaginations, recruit several students to share experiences they have had outdoors (i.e., hiking or camping). Students' articles should describe the landscape and their journey across it in enough detail that readers will be able to envision the images. Conclude by asking for volunteers to share their writing with the class.

PROMOTING CONSTRUCTED LANDSCAPES

Bierstadt was commonly known as a strategic businessman. Along with his contemporary Church, Bierstadt frequently exhibited his work nationally and internationally in pay-as-you-enter extravaganzas, where he dramatically unveiled his canvas by pulling back a lush curtain in front of a stunned audience. These promotional techniques, in addition to his enterprise of producing prints of his finished works, earned the artist tremendous financial success before the rise of the Transcontinental Railroad and subsequent decreased interest in landscape painting. In this art and writing activity, students will practice the art of persuasion as they seek to promote their own constructed landscapes. Please note: this writing exercise is prefaced by an art-making activity.

Ask students to bring to class magazines, newspapers, or photographs that depict images of nature. Using scissors and other materials, each student should create a composite landscape in the fashion of the artwork by Bierstadt. Students should be encouraged to select images from various sources—a mountain from the Rockies, a river from Connecticut, and a sky from the Bahamas, for example. Once their image is complete, ask students to write an ad for a local travel agency that promotes tourism to this location. Students should describe their landscape in as much detail as possible so as to entice travelers to visit. Be sure students name their invented destinations based upon the elements in nature that may be found there. Just hearing the name should give the reader a clear understanding of type of location a student is promoting.



Just Jargon

Background: The part of a painting that appears the farthest away from the viewer. Objects appear smaller than those found in the rest of the artwork.

Composite: In the work of Bierstadt, composite refers to the combination of various geological sources to create a landscape in which the conveyance of emotion is preferred over geographic accuracy. Bierstadt's inspiration for his composite landscapes stemmed from the sketches he produced throughout his American and European travels.

Composition: The arrangement or placement of objects within a work of art.

Daguerreotype (n. daguerreotypist): A photographic process invented in the early nineteenth century that produces a positive print on a light-sensitized copperplate; the first commercially successful photographic process.

Daniel Wadsworth (1771–1848): This avid traveler and amateur artist and architect was one of the earliest art patrons in the United States and founded the Wadsworth Atheneum in 1842. Due to Wadsworth's belief that America's vast wilderness was a symbol of the nation's potential, he insisted on bringing the aesthetic qualities and historic associations of the northeastern landscape to the nation's attention. His close associations with leading members of the Hudson River School facilitated these efforts.

Düsseldorf Art Academy (Kunstakademie Düsseldorf): An art school founded in the city of Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1762. Bierstadt entered the academy in 1853. Although admired in New York City during the mid-1800s, the institution's landscape style became less popular after coming under criticism for its lack of liveliness and personal expression.

Elizabeth Hart Jarvis Colt (1826–1905): Widow of arms manufacturer Samuel Colt, a businesswoman, and patron of the arts, Elizabeth Colt actively commissioned works by Hudson River School artists for her personal picture gallery, which she began as a memorial to her husband during the Civil War. Colt bequeathed nearly six hundred objects, including paintings by numerous Hudson River School artists, to the Wadsworth Atheneum upon her death.

En Plein Air: A French expression meaning "in the open air." This term is often used to describe the act of sketching or painting outdoors, a practice employed by a number of Hudson River School artists that was revolutionary for its time.

Foreground: The part of a painting that appears closest to the viewer. Objects appear larger than those found in the rest of the artwork.

Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900): A contemporary of Albert Bierstadt, Hartford-born Frederic Edwin Church apprenticed under Thomas Cole, a position afforded him by his father's close relationship with museum founder Daniel Wadsworth. Interested in the scientific advancements in the field of geology, Church was the first Hudson River School artist to paint on location in South America. Characterized by their composite botanical, geographical, and meteorological renditions of nature, his compositions were executed with extraordinary detail and textural accuracy. *See Teacher Resource: "Coast Scene, Mount Desert (Sunrise off the Maine Coast)," 1863 for more information about this artist and his work.*

Landscape: A scene of nature. Landscape imagery became popular with the advent of the Hudson River School, which displaced portraiture as the leading subject matter in nineteenth-century America.



Manifest Destiny: The nineteenth-century belief that it was America’s divine right and mission to spread democracy, sparking the swift settlement and industrialization of the wilderness in the western territories. Many Hudson River School artists embedded their canvases with this sentiment, which strategically served to morally uplift the viewing audience.

Middle Ground: The middle layer of a work of art between the foreground and the background.

Panorama (adj. panoramic): An unobstructed view, extending in all directions, of a landscape. Hudson River School painters consistently used this compositional device to demonstrate nature’s power, grandeur, and expansiveness and to symbolically reveal the endless potential of American society.

Realism: Using recognizable imagery to show things as they appear in real life; the opposite of abstraction. Hudson River School artists are known for the heightened use of detail in their depictions of the natural world, which was aided by their direct observance of their subjects, outdoor sketching practices, and newfound scientific understandings in the field of geology.

Romanticism: In this case, the literary movement—stressing strong emotion, individual imagination, and the rejection of scientific rationalization of nature—that inspired the work of the Hudson River School artists, particularly by Romantic writers’ validation of the emotional qualities inherent in nature. The Romantic movement gave rise to New England **Transcendentalism**, a nineteenth-century philosophy that promoted the belief that an ideal spiritual state “transcended” the physical and the empirical and was only realized through an individual’s intuition and inner essence. Transcendentalists believed in the innate goodness of man and that insight was greater than logic and experience for the revelation of the deepest truths. Many found inspiration in the New England wilderness, and their writings influenced the aesthetics of the Hudson River School.

School: A group of artists whose thought, work, or style reflects a common theme. In the case of the Hudson River School artists, their collective vision was a sense of pride and meaning in the beauty of the American wilderness.

Sublime: As an adjective, impressing upon the mind a sense of awe, veneration, grandeur, and power; as a proper noun, a philosophy distinguishing between what is beautiful and what has the power to destroy or compel us. Hudson River School painters employed the Sublime in their works to represent the magnitude of nature over man.

Tenth Street Studio Building: Constructed in 1857, the first modern facility to serve artists’ needs. Artists lived, worked, exhibited, and sold their work there. Throughout the nineteenth century, it would remain the center of the New York art world, housing many of the Hudson River School painters.

Texture: How a surface feels (actual) or looks like it would feel (implied). Common textures include smooth, rough, jagged, and slippery.

Thomas Cole (1801–1848): The leading member of the Hudson River School. Cole’s realistic depictions of nature radically broke from the European tradition of manicured and pastoral landscapes as he experimented with the primeval wilderness of the American northeast. Cole favored allegorical and moralistic themes in his canvases; he work often warns of the perils inherent in the settlement of the American wilderness. Interested in symbolically portraying the virgin quality of the land, Cole frequently included Native Americans in his compositions while eliminating all signs of human settlement, even those that had already taken place.



Book Resources for Deeper Exploration

- Anderson, Nancy K., Linda S. Ferber, and Helena E. Wright. *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990.
- Baigell, Matthew. *Albert Bierstadt*. New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1981.
- Flexner, J. T. *Nineteenth Century American Painting*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970.
- Hendricks, Gordon. *A. Bierstadt*. Exh. cat. Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1972.
- . *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of the American West*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1974.
- Howat, John K. *American Paradise: The World of the Hudson River School*. Exh. cat. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987.
- Millhouse, Barbara Babcock. *American Wilderness: The Story of the Hudson River School of Painting*. New York: Black Dome Press, 2007.
- O'Toole, Judith Hansen. *Different Views in Hudson River School Painting*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Sears, John F. *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Web Resources for Deeper Exploration

Additional Hudson River School Lesson Ideas

- <http://www.albanyinstitute.org/education/Hudson%20River%20School/hrs.activities.htm>
<http://www.hickorymuseumofart.org/pdfs/Hudson%20River%20School%20Era%20teacher%20packet.pdf>

Albert Bierstadt: The Complete Works

- <http://www.albertbierstadt.org/>

Digital History: Learn about Westward Expansion

- <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/modules/westward/index.cfm>

The Hudson River School Collection at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

- <http://www.thewadsworth.org/hudson-river-school/>

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Hudson River School

- http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hurs/hd_hurs.htm

U.S. History: Pre-Columbian to the New Millennium

Manifest Destiny

- <http://www.ushistory.org/us/29.asp>

White Mountain Art and Artists

- http://whitemountainart.com/biographies/bio_ab.htm

XMission: Albert Bierstadt Gallery

- <http://user.xmission.com/~emailbox/glenda/bierstadt/bierstadt.html>



References

- Ayres, Linda, ed. *“The Spirit of Genius”: Art at the Wadsworth Atheneum*. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1992.
- Craven, Wayne. *American Art: History and Culture*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2003.
- Kornhauser, Elizabeth Mankin, Amy Ellis, and Maureen Miesmer. *Hudson River School: Masterworks from the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art*. Exh. cat. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Kornhauser, Elizabeth Mankin, Elizabeth R. McClintock, and Amy Ellis. *American Paintings before 1945 in the Wadsworth Atheneum*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Stebbins, Jr., Theodore E. *The Hudson River School: Nineteenth-Century American Landscapes in the Wadsworth Atheneum*. Exh. cat. Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1976.
- Walsh-Piper, Kathleen. *Image to Word: Art and Creative Writing*. Lanham, Md., and London: Scarecrow Press, 2002.

This teacher resource was written by Emily Pacini Ide, Assistant Museum Educator for Community Programs, with editorial assistance by the museum’s Education and Curatorial departments.



Albert Bierstadt

American, 1830–1902

In the Mountains, 1867

Oil on canvas

36 3/16 x 50 1/4 in.

Gift of John Junius Morgan in memory of his mother Juliet Pierpont Morgan, 1923.253
From the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT.