

Buffalo Trail (The Impending Storm)

By Albert Bierstadt

Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on Canvas
- Date: 1869 (some sources say c. 1867)
- Size: 29 3/8 x 49 3/8"
- Location: The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington DC
- Period:
- Style: Luminism
- Genre: Landscape
- The buffalo flee from the terrific storm coming from the right.
- The tall trees with craggy peaks stop the eye flow from continuing to the left and brings the viewer back to the focal point of the lead buffalo.

Artist Facts

- Albert Bierstadt: Pronounced (Beer-stat)
- Born January 7, 1830 in Germany
- Died February 18, 1902 in New York City, New York
- Bierstadt was born in Germany but immigrated to Massachusetts when he was three.
- As a child he had many crayon sketches.
- When he was 23 he went back to Germany to study art for four years.
- When he was 28, he joined a government expedition to the west. He sketched scenes in oil, never spending more than fifteen minutes to portray the scene. His aim was to rework the sketches in his studio. He was not interested in exactitude; he altered the scenery for dramatic weight.
- His paintings emphasized atmospheric elements like fog, clouds and mist to accentuate and complement the feel of his work. Bierstadt sometimes changed details of the landscape to inspire awe. The colors he used are also not always true. He painted what he believed was the way things should be: water is ultramarine, vegetation is lush and green, etc.
- In 1882 his studio at Irvington, New York, was destroyed by fire, with many of his paintings.
- Bierstadt belonged to a group of painters called luminists (meaning radiating or reflecting light.) They were called this because of their use of light.
- Bierstadt died suddenly in 1902 but his artwork became popular again in the 1960's when people became interested in preserving national lands.
- Bierstadt painted hundreds of paintings of the newly discovered and unsettled west.
- Because of Bierstadt's interest in mountain landscapes, Mount Bierstadt (Front Range region of the Rocky Mountains, in Clear Creek County, Colorado) and Bierstadt Lake (in Colorado) are named in his honor.
- Bierstadt has had two of his paintings used for US Postal stamps.
- His use of uncommonly large canvases was thought to be an egotistical indulgence by some art critiques of the day, as his paintings would invariably dwarf those of his contemporaries when they were displayed together.

Key Element of Design to Teach

- Value is the use of light and dark in an art piece. Higher values are described as being light and lower values are referred to as being dark. In painting, value is often referred to as tint and shade. Tint is light and shade is dark.

Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach Value

- Do you see light in this painting?
- Where do you see light? Everywhere or just certain places?
- Can you see shadows in this painting? Where? Talk about the direction the light is coming from and how light can cast a shadow.
- Do you see dark places in this painting? Where? Why are they dark?
- Point out the lighter and darker values in the painting and how the artist creates darker shades by adding black and lighter tints by adding white.
- Have the students squint at the painting to help them distinguish the light areas from the dark ones. (Dark areas will fade back when you squint.)
- Line up a row of small plastic animals (buffalos are hard to come by...) and ask a student to come up and help you. Using a flash light (I like to give the student one and have one for myself) show how if you point the light at the first animal it is very bright, while the others are dark and harder to see. The artist used light to help us distinguish which buffalo was the leader, the most important, etc. Use a flashlight to demonstrate how the body of the animal blocks the light and casts a shadow.

Keywords

- Value, landscape, light, contrast, emphasis, texture, perspective

Other Possible Questions and Suggestions

- What do you think it would be like to live in the west in the 1800's?
- How would it have been different than now?
- What are the buffalo doing in this painting?
- Which buffalo is the most important? How do we know? (It is the largest, has the most detail, is surrounded by light, is placed in the center of the painting.) This buffalo is the focal point. The artist made the other buffaloes smaller so they would seem further away and less important.
- Is there water in this painting? How can you tell it is water?
- What time of day is it in this painting? How can you tell?
- What textures do you see in this painting? The grass, the water, the sky?
- Are the buffalo in the front bigger or smaller than the ones in the back? Why?
- What is the focal point of this piece? How can you tell?
- Cover the bottom half of the painting. What would you guess is in this painting?
- What elements of nature do you see in this painting?
- How many buffalo do you see in this painting?
- This painting is also known as The Impending Storm. Why do you think that is?
- Do you think the artist sat in the field to paint this whole picture before the storm reached him?
- Does this painting almost look like a photograph? (Yes, this is called realism.)