

# The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak

## By Albert Bierstadt

### Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on Canvas
- Date: 1863
- Size: 186.7 x 306.7 cm (Just bigger than 6 feet by 10 feet) This painting is huge!
- Location: Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC
- Period:
- Style: Luminism
- Genre: Landscape
- The idea for this artwork came from the artist's first trip west in 1859. The journey, headed by Frederick W. Lander, was part of a government expedition to the Nebraska Territory to find a suitable route for the Pacific Railroad. On the journey, Bierstadt made quick sketches in oil (never more than 15 minutes) After his trip, he reworked them in his studio to get the best possible effects. He was not interested in exactitude, and altered things to make them beautiful.
- This painting is of the Wind River Range of the Rocky Mountains in western Wyoming.
- Following Colonel Lander's death in the Civil War in 1862, Bierstadt named the mountain peak Lander's Peak after his friend. It is still named that today.
- Shoshone Indians are in the foreground of this painting, but the artist wanted the mountains and sky to be the focus.
- This painting sold in 1865 for \$25,000, which was an enormous amount of money in 1865. The artist later bought it back and gave (or sold) it to his brother Edward.

### Artist Facts

- Albert Bierstadt: Pronounced (Beer-stat)
- Born January 7, 1830 in Germany
- Died February 18, 1902 (age 72) 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 Term to Teach

- **Landscape** art is a term that covers the depiction of natural scenery such as mountains, valleys, trees, rivers, and forests, and especially art where the main subject is a wide view, with its elements arranged into a coherent composition. Sky is almost always included in the view, and weather is often an element of the composition.

### Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach Landscape

- What elements of nature can you identify in this painting?
- What sounds would you hear if you were in this painting?
- How does the artist depict the sky? The running water of the waterfall?
- What would the weather be like?

### Keywords

- Landscape, light, contrast, emphasis

### Other Possible Questions and Suggestions

- Show students how big this painting is using a measuring tape or paper.
- 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?
- Look closely at the foreground; what are the Indians doing in this painting? Tell them you will leave it in the classroom and suggest students look at it later for horses, dog, dead goat, etc.
- Cover the bottom 2/3 of the painting. Take off the top third. Is this a dark or light painting? Take off one more third. Is this painting still light or dark? Then remove the last third. This is called contrast. The artist uses light and contrast to make the painting interesting and to draw emphasis to certain parts of the painting.
- What do you think is the focal point (the point the artists wants to draw your eye to)? How does the artist draw your eye to the waterfall?
- What emotions does this painting make you feel?
- Would you want to camp here?
- What else would you do if you were here?

- Bierstadt liked to paint things the way he wanted them to be rather than the way they really were. Show the picture of Old Faithful in the packet. Notice the lake in front of it. This is something he added in, rather than what it really looks like there.
- Show stamp and tell students he had two US postage stamps with his paintings on them.