

**ALBERT BIERSTADT AND THE SPECULATIVE TERRAIN  
OF AMERICAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING, 1866-1877**

by

Spencer Wigmore

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Art History

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## ABSTRACT

Beginning in the mid-1860s, the German-American landscape painter Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902) used the fortune earned from his painting practice to make speculative investments in railroads, mines, and real estate across the American West, often at or near the sites that he depicted in his landscapes. As his involvement in speculation deepened, Bierstadt worked to align himself with an emergent culture of elite transatlantic finance. Reconstructing Bierstadt’s ambitions as a speculator, this dissertation investigates the relationship between the artist’s land dealings and his landscape paintings. In doing so, it argues that Bierstadt’s pictures invite audiences to imagine western space as if they were speculators. In advancing this claim, this dissertation reassesses Bierstadt’s reputation as an American Western artist, revealing his conviction that the cultural, economic, and social value of western land stemmed from its exchangeability as a financial asset.

Progressing chronologically, each chapter analyzes a major midcareer landscape by Bierstadt, contending that formal peculiarities in these works evince the artist’s creative engagement with speculation. Chapter Two explores how inscrutable topography in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie* (1866) dramatizes the challenges that mining speculators faced when assessing the value of underground spaces. Chapter Three reckons with the long viewing distances that Bierstadt’s paintings often demand, proposing that in *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (1868), long-distance viewing metaphorizes the importance of connecting remote western spaces to Northeastern and European financiers. Chapter Four demonstrates how *Mount Corcoran* (ca. 1876-77) harnesses conventions from cartography to evoke the experience of receiving an insider tip about promising land—

an interpretation informed by new archival research into Bierstadt's attempts to profit from silver mines in the Inyo Mountains of Eastern California. Taken together, these examples offer a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between Bierstadt's landscape paintings, the western environment, and the transatlantic economic forces that informed American imperial expansion during the second half of the nineteenth century.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

On January 22, 1880, the German-American landscape painter Albert Bierstadt (fig. 1.1) wrote General William Tecumseh Sherman pleading for help. “Some years ago,” he began, “when out in Inyo [County] California I loaned some money on some mining property and the parties never have returned the money.” Explaining that his creditors were now trying to sell the property without acknowledging his stake, he asked Sherman to forward his news via telegram to the commanding military officer in Inyo County in hopes that the officer might settle the dispute. “I would appreciate most highly any thing you can do for me in this matter,” Bierstadt concluded.<sup>1</sup>

Bierstadt’s letter to Sherman marked the unsuccessful end of a nearly decade-long attempt to wring profit out of a silver mining scheme in Eastern California. In 1872, during a two-year visit to California, Bierstadt invested several thousand dollars in a fledgling San Francisco mining company, the Waucoba Mining and Smelting Company, which planned to work a cache of silver ore deposits found in the Inyo Mountains, a rugged, remote, and largely unmapped range east of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. After making the investment, he returned to New York, where, for the next eight years, he waited as the company’s mining engineers tried, failed, and tried again

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Bierstadt to General William Tecumseh Sherman, January 20, 1880, Gordon Hendricks Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Box 20, Folder 3. If Sherman replied, his letter remains unlocated.

to establish a profitable mining operation. When the mines failed for good and his partners vanished, Bierstadt found himself on the opposite side of the continent, helpless and facing significant losses.

Bierstadt's letter is a fragment from a significant and entirely unstudied aspect of the landscape painter's biography: his forays into land speculation. Beginning in the late-1860s, Bierstadt used the fortune earned from his painting practice to make speculative investments in railroads, mines, and real estate across the United States and in Canada. These investments took a range of forms, most of which related to mining and railway building in the North American West. Bierstadt bought up land along proposed transcontinental railway routes in Canada; acquired downtown real estate in fast-growing Minneapolis; maneuvered to acquire a stake in one of the largest ranches in Texas; attempted to flip ownership of a Nevada iron mine; and, as his letter to Sherman indicates, backed a silver mining venture in the Inyo Mountains.<sup>2</sup>

Forays into land speculation might seem an unusual place to begin a project on a landscape painter, but the aesthetic complexity of Bierstadt's paintings hinges on

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<sup>2</sup> In 1886, Bierstadt purchased seven adjacent lots along Lake Harriet in Southwest Minneapolis for \$5,250. Soon after, Rosalie, his wife bought two additional lots for \$3,000. "Minneapolis Real Estate," *Saint Paul Daily Globe*, November 24, 1886; "Minneapolis Real Estate," *Saint Paul Daily Globe*, December 30, 1886, 3. On Bierstadt's attempts to acquire Texas ranch land, see Michael R. Grauer, "Picturing Palo Duro: A Case Study," *Panhandle-Plains Historical Review* 87 (2016): 41-47. While I touch on Bierstadt's California, Colorado, and Nevada investments at various points in this study, I do not discuss his dealings in Canada, Minnesota, and Texas. These deals took place late in Bierstadt's career, well after the period in his artistic career that is the focus of this study. Furthermore, Bierstadt's Canadian land dealings are already well documented in Alan Pringle, "Albert Bierstadt in Canada," *The American Art Journal* 17 (Winter 1985): 9. Nonetheless, future research into Bierstadt's land dealings in other parts of the country may reveal new insights into his artmaking.

their maker's creative engagement with financial thinking. Bierstadt's pictures, I contend, invite Northeastern and European audiences to value and imagine the American West as if they were land speculators.

In advancing this claim, I reassess Bierstadt's reputation as an American Western artist. Bierstadt is often viewed as an artist-explorer, as someone whose historic reputation, particularly among his patrons, hinged on the sketching expeditions that he undertook early in his career to the Wind River Mountains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Sierra Nevada Mountains in 1859 and 1863. In this familiar reading, Bierstadt's artistic identity is closely linked to his experiences sketching amidst a nonurban West. Recently, this interpretation has taken on a new dimension: Bierstadt has been recast as both a firsthand witness to a vanishing preindustrial frontier and someone who harbored anti-colonial sympathies.<sup>3</sup>

However, the historical archive of Bierstadt's land speculations reveals a different engagement with western space. Beginning in the mid-1860s, Bierstadt worked to present himself as a transatlantic financier, as someone whose reputation among his patrons stemmed from his ability to forge financial and communicative links between sites of natural resource extraction in the West and urban centers in San Francisco, New York, and London. Bierstadt fashioned himself for his patrons not as an artist-explorer and a rugged observer of a vanishing frontier, but rather as a well-connected transatlantic financier, someone abreast of the latest developments of financial practice and their potential impact on western space.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Hassrick, *Albert Bierstadt: Witness to a Changing West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018).

Through this analysis, I propose a new way of thinking about how Bierstadt's landscapes engage with the industrial exploitation of the American West. Bierstadt's paintings are often interpreted as ideological veils, works that hid the harmful social, environmental, and economic consequences of American imperialism behind Edenic subject matter and pictorial conventions of the sublime. In this reading, Bierstadt's grandiose scenery offered viewers a "carefully composed assurance" that the scenic grandeur of the West would provide a haven from the large-scale industrialization of western space, the turmoil of the Civil War, or the violence of land expropriation.<sup>4</sup> Rather than characterize Bierstadt's style as a distillation of preexisting conventions, I instead argue for a more dynamic understanding of the interchange between his landscapes and the factors driving financial and industrial exploitation of the American West.

Specifically, I propose that Bierstadt's landscapes locate the value of nature solely in its potential transmissibility on the market as a financial asset—as opposed to in its environmental, historical, or material aspects. This emphasis on transmissibility is manifest in a particular mode of address from picture to viewer, a mode that works to materialize the broader networks of communication that facilitated speculative investment. Bierstadt's paintings do not delineate terrain as seen from an observable viewpoint; instead, at the level of brushwork and composition they give form to the

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<sup>4</sup> Nancy K. Anderson, "The Kiss of Enterprise: The Western Land as Symbol and Resource," in *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, eds. William H. Truettner and Nancy K. Anderson (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art, 1991), 241. See also Angela Miller, "Albert Bierstadt, Landscape Aesthetics, and the Meanings of the West in the Civil War Era," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 27, no. 1 (2001): 80-81.

social and representational factors that allowed remote, immobile parcels of western space to circulate on the market as exchangeable commodities.<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, Bierstadt's paintings warrant examination in relation to historical processes of commodification, specifically the processes by which western public land became private property during the second half of the nineteenth century. It is not enough to note simply that western land was a commodity and that Bierstadt traded it as such; rather, it is necessary to examine exactly how western land became a commodity, and how Bierstadt gained the ability to trade it. This is a cultural question as much as it is an economic one. As Arjun Appadurai emphasizes, things become commodities only when they meet certain requirements of "candidacy"—"standards and criteria (symbolic, classificatory, and moral) that define the exchangeability of things in any particular historical context."<sup>6</sup> By offering a realm in which these standards can be established and debated, culture functions as a counterweight to commodification, defining the extent to which things (or living beings) can take on exchange value. Through culture, various social actors negotiate the transformation of things into commodities, whether as part of an effort to resist the homogenizing

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<sup>5</sup> In referring to land as a commodity, I use the term "commodity" in a broad sense, referring to things that have exchange value as well as use value, and which are exchanged in market transactions for other commodities. For a broader discussion of the definition of a commodity, particularly in regards to the process by which things become or stop being commodities, see Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-94.

<sup>6</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Idem (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 13-14.



tendencies of commodification, or in an attempt to gain exclusive rights to the profits yielded by a particular type of commodity.<sup>7</sup> Bierstadt's landscape dealings and land dealings fall firmly in the latter camp. They form part of an effort to mark the value of western land as the domain of a privileged elite.

To establish Bierstadt's position relative to cultural factors that marked western lands as exchangeable commodities during the 1860s and 1870s, I attend to the relationship between real estate and real estate. As Alexia Yates emphasizes, drawing on Appadurai's theories of the commodity, real estate is a function of representation. Unlike other commodities, land is bound to place; it cannot move. One can put goods extracted from it into circulation, but the physical property itself remains immobile. In order for land to become real estate—for it to take on value as a financial asset—it must be rendered transmissible through an act of representation. Something—a property title, a claim map, a survey report, a deed—must circulate as a stand in for the property itself. Moreover, the representational forms that real estate ultimately takes will circumscribe the extent of land's transmissibility as a commodity.<sup>8</sup> How land is represented as real estate informs who is allowed to discern it as such, who is allowed to buy or sell it, and the ease with which it might circulate through the market.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> On the relationship between the social life of real estate and the legibility of land as exchangeable property, see Alexia Yates, *Selling Paris: Property and Commercial Culture in the Fin-de-siècle Capital* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

Bierstadt's landscapes not only highlight the potential transmissibility of western space, they mark this property of space as the domain of a particular intersectional social group: white male investors in urban centers in the American Northeast and in England. During the second half of the nineteenth century, ascendant New England and New York financial elites, working in tandem with an emergent class of British investors, injected large sums of surplus capital into mines, railroads, and telegraphic infrastructure throughout the American and Canadian West.<sup>10</sup> As recent scholarship on financial history has demonstrated, these investors used capital not merely to obtain profit, but also as a tool of self-definition—as a means of securing cultural and political authority in their respective countries.<sup>11</sup> As both a speculator and a painter, Bierstadt worked to capitalize on this broader practice of self-definition. During the 1860s and 1870s, he worked to align himself culturally, economically, and socially with members of this transatlantic investment class. He did so not only to secure patronage or profitable land, but to also garner some of the status

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<sup>10</sup> For a summary of the “complex web of interdependent parts” that facilitated British capital investment in the West, see Ronald Findlay and Kevin H. O'Rourke, *Power and Plenty: Trade, War, and the World Economy in the Second Millennium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 402-409.

<sup>11</sup> Transatlantic investment in the American West was not merely to the outcome of impersonal forces of technological innovation or a rationalist logic of supply and demand. Scholarship on the use of surplus capital as political cudgel is extensive, but for helpful introductions to the topic as it applies to the American West, see Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 114-136; Noam Maggor, *Brahmin Capitalism: Frontiers of Wealth and Populism in America's First Gilded Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), xxv-xxvi.

conferred on this elite group. Bierstadt was therefore not only interested in the monetary exchange value of land—although evidence suggests that this remained prominent in his mind. He was also interested in the social capital that commodified land offered its owners.<sup>12</sup>

As Richard White and others have noted, the speculative land dealings that unfolded in the West during the 1860s and 1870s provoked widespread anti-monopolistic sentiment amongst the American public, and these sentiments resulted in a wave of reform-minded politics in the 1880s.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, Bierstadt and his pictures appear to have remained largely removed from popular debates about speculation; the discourses with which they intersected were predominantly elite ones. There are no surviving remarks by the painter on the morality or political implications of speculative investment, and he seems to have largely avoided taking public stances on all but the least controversial matters of the day.<sup>14</sup> His thoughts on speculation

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<sup>12</sup> In other words, Bierstadt's ability to exchange western land within elite insider markets offered the artist a form of social capital, defined by Pamela Walker Laird as a form of legitimacy that enables financial actors in specific contexts to "attract respect, generate confidence, evoke affection, and draw on loyalty." Pamela Walker Laird, *Pull: Networking and Success since Benjamin Franklin* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Richard White, *The Republic for which it Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), 555-578. See also Edward T. O'Donnell, *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Late in his career, Bierstadt did choose to weigh in on debates about import tariffs on paintings (he opposed them). But this remains the only surviving record of the artist choosing to remark publicly on the politics of matters of finance and taxation.

were private, circulated amongst a narrow elite, and confined exclusively to search for more profitable investments.

In my research, I found one only one instance in which a Bierstadt landscape was pulled into the orbit of popular discourses of real estate and land values—as opposed to the inter-elite conversation that characterized Bierstadt’s relation to speculation. When Bierstadt exhibited a selection of paintings at the 1886 Minneapolis Industrial Exposition, a local critic wondered how the reported \$25,000 valuation of one of the landscapes might be perceived by a rural landowner, someone who “has been struggling for several years to pay off a mortgage of a few hundred dollars on a quarter section of land.”<sup>15</sup> Although this cutting comparison between real and painted land values is striking, the critic’s remark remains an archival anomaly. Nonetheless, future research might lead to a more fulsome understanding of the relationship between landscape paintings and popular discourse around land reform in the late nineteenth century.

With these factors in mind, it becomes necessary to adopt a new lens when assessing Bierstadt’s social positioning as an artist of the American West. Capital investment in the nineteenth-century West was a transnational phenomenon, not a national one—it was the result of American and British financiers working in tandem to assert their political authority as harbingers of a new era of transnational economic and communicative connectedness and growth. Nationalist factors mediated the circulation of capital—relevant examples include the commissioning of federal geological surveys and land grant subsidies for corporations—however, this financial

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<sup>15</sup> “Exposition Visitors,” *Saint Paul Daily Globe* (Minnesota), August 30, 1886, 6.

culture is not reducible to expansionist ideologies or government policies specific to the United States.<sup>16</sup> Thus, this study presents Bierstadt as a transatlantic figure rather than a narrowly western one, as someone who is better understood in relation to financial and communicative developments in New York and in London than histories of overland exploration in the Trans-Mississippi West. This alternate positioning becomes manifest when one attends not just to the transatlantic mobility of Bierstadt and his paintings, but also to the mobility of his financial assets as they circulated across the United States and the Atlantic.<sup>17</sup>

Bierstadt's paintings may locate the value of western space in its transmissibility as real estate, yet his own forays into land speculation reveal both the imperialist consequences and environmental limits of this sensibility. As Yates emphasizes, land's physical immobility means that real estate is "particularly freighted with political and affective investment," and that it is "subject to a complex and contingent moral economy that shapes the process of its marketization."<sup>18</sup> Nowhere is this more evident in Bierstadt's biography than in his land dealings in the Inyo

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<sup>16</sup> Nationalist factors also include economic populism, particularly the resistance of labor to the forces of economic globalization. Although the politics at the interface of American labor and transnational capital in the American West falls outside the bounds of this study, detailed discussions of the topic appear in Maggor, *Brahmin Capitalism* and Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Gerald Carr was the first to suggest that Bierstadt's travels back and forth across the Atlantic might have informed the compositional decisions that he made in his landscapes. Carr, "Albert Bierstadt, Big Trees, and the British: A Log of Many Anglo-American Ties," *Arts Magazine* 50 (1986): 60-71.

<sup>18</sup> Yates, *Selling Paris*, 11.

Mountains. Bierstadt's Inyo speculations were a direct outgrowth of a state-sponsored project of genocide against Owens Valleys indigenous population, a project that can be traced directly to local prospectors' desires to attract investors like Bierstadt to the region. In this sense, Bierstadt's paintings are inextricable from the often brutal interface of capital and indigenous homelands. As such, they complicate recuperative attempts to recast Bierstadt as a historically exceptional sympathizer of dispossessed American Indians.

In addition to the "political and affective" factors that flare up in the face of the homogenizing tendencies of capital investment, environmental factors warrant consideration as well. Bierstadt's historical West was a material space, not a mythic one. As Bierstadt's letter to Sherman suggests, the painter's own land speculations ran aground on the arid, rugged, and remote environmental conditions of Eastern California. In this sense, he fell victim to the alienating tendencies of the commodity form, to the way that processes of commodification obscure the human and environmental labor involved in a commodity's production and circulation.<sup>19</sup> Read in this light, Bierstadt's landscapes offer a window into the exploitative transnational

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<sup>19</sup> As this study will illuminate, Bierstadt's failures as an investor were also due to the epistemological limitations of speculative investment. Appadurai highlights the forms of specialized knowledge that arise in groups seeking to profit from the exchange of commodities, forms of knowledge that are ultimately blindered by the structure of the commodity fetish. "Mythological understandings of the circulation of commodities," he writes, "are generated because of the detachment, indifference, or ignorance of participants as regards to all but a single aspect of the economic trajectory of the commodity. Enclaved in either the production, speculative trade, or consumption locus in the flow of commodities, technical knowledge tends to be quickly subordinated to more idiosyncratic subcultural theories about the origins and destinations of things." Appadurai, "Commodities and the Politics of Value," 54.

financial forces that aggressively worked to translate the physical topography of the West into surplus capital, but they also lead to signs of the West's historical (and ongoing) resistance to such obstinately profit and status-driven ventures.

### **Structure of the Dissertation**

To illuminate intersections between Bierstadt's landscapes and his forays into speculative finance, each chapter takes as its subject a major large-scale exhibition landscape made by Bierstadt between 1866 and 1876: *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie* (fig. 1.2); *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (fig. 1.3); and *Mount Corcoran* (fig. 1.4). Not only were these three pictures some of the most widely viewed and discussed of Bierstadt's landscapes, their production tracks key moments in Bierstadt's engagement with financial speculation. Starting in 1863, during his second trip West, Bierstadt took an interest in capital investment projects in the Rocky Mountains; shortly thereafter, he gained entry to an elite culture of transatlantic financiers; later, in the early 1870s, he embarked on his own investment scheme in the Inyo Mountains of Eastern California. These developments, as this study will demonstrate, informed his approach to landscape depiction in significant ways. Collectively, the three pictures chart the progression of a significant and overlooked shift in Bierstadt's pictorial style, in which the painter reworked period conventions of pictorial naturalism to engage with the transcontinental and cross-border flows of capital that characterize finance capitalism.

Chapter One locates the origins of this stylistic transformation *In A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie*, a monumental, twelve-foot-wide exhibition landscape that Bierstadt composed from studies made during an 1863 visit to the Rocky Mountains near Denver, Colorado. In this picture, Bierstadt introduces

narrative and compositional cues that challenge the interpretive authority of a viewer who imaginatively inhabits and moves through the depicted scene. Distorted topography and inscrutable shadows structure an encounter in which land's economic value is no longer reliably discernable from the surface of the earth—a mode of viewing that spoke to the challenges that prospectors faced locating subterranean gold deposits in the Rockies. More broadly, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* questions the epistemological utility of the grounded, embedded viewpoint that is a fundamental premise of nineteenth-century landscape painting, a questioning that set the stage for Bierstadt's subsequent experimentation with the landscape medium.

Notably, Bierstadt's move away from this grounded viewpoint paralleled a broader shift in his pictorial and economic relationship to the American West. Two years prior to the production of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, Bierstadt had organized the Indian Department at the 1864 Metropolitan Sanitary Fair, a purpose-built tent that hosted daily performances by a troupe of hired American Indians.<sup>20</sup> Recently uncovered archival evidence reveals that Bierstadt became embroiled in a labor dispute with the hired performers, a dispute that contributed to his decision to abandon an economy of performance in favor of the then more lucrative economy of landscape painting. Bringing to light the behind-the-scenes life of the Indian Department, this chapter suggests that the stylistic shift evident in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* functions as a severing of the iconographic elements that tied his pictures to an economy of performance. With its ties to Front Range mining and Sanitary Fairs in New York, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* registers Bierstadt's

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<sup>20</sup> As I discuss in Chapter One, the tribal affiliations of the performers are lost, although some evidence suggests that they were members of the Iroquois Six Nations.



shifting understanding of the economic potential of the American West. Linger within this shift, though, are vital signs of how Bierstadt's paintings, despite their maker's crude economic rationalism, have historically afforded spaces for assertions of agency by American Indian subjects of various tribal affiliations.

Moving across the Atlantic, Chapter Two examines when and how Bierstadt began to engage with transatlantic finance. Taking as its subject the 1868 unveiling of *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* at the Langham Hotel in London, this chapter highlights Bierstadt's efforts to align his artistic reputation with an emergent class of elite Northeastern and British financiers, a select group of white men working to position themselves culturally and politically as the catalyst of a new era of economic, communicative, and technological connectivity between the United States and the United Kingdom. *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains* contributes to Bierstadt's efforts to associate himself with this class, and it does so by staging within the exhibition space an act of long-distance communication, one in which the physical distance between the picture and its viewers metaphorizes the links between London financiers and sites of natural resource extraction in the American West. In doing so, the picture proclaims that the value of western space is realized only once it is brought into the purview of those a continent plus an ocean away.<sup>21</sup> This pictorial sensibility

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<sup>21</sup> In advancing these claims, I follow Jennifer Roberts' foundational interpretation of Asher Durand's plein air landscapes of the 1840s and 1850s, in which she proposes that Durand contested the communicative demands of telegraphy by painting pictures laden with material and visual density, a pictorial mode marked by its "recalcitrance to electronic transmission." If Durand's pictures manifest a certain wariness toward the communicative revolution, Bierstadt's pictures embrace such transformations uncritically. Jennifer Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 6.

aligns Bierstadt's style with new communications technologies, such as the transatlantic telegraph, as well as with the elite social spaces that these technologies engendered.<sup>22</sup>

Chapter Three takes up Bierstadt's own land speculations, using them as a lens to offer a new interpretation of *Mount Corcoran*, a depiction of the High Sierras above Owens Valley, California. The picture has puzzled scholars due to the fact that Bierstadt chose the picture's subject retroactively, after he finished painting it. Through a detailed reconstruction of Bierstadt's involvement in the Waucoba Mining and Smelting Company, this chapter shows how the artist exploited personal connections with state surveyors and local army officers in Eastern California to secure ownership of Inyo Mountain mining lands that he had never seen nor encountered firsthand. Bierstadt invested in the Inyo Mountains blindly, acquiring titles to mining lands before he learned what they actually contained. The retroactive establishment of *Mount Corcoran* as a depiction of a real space follows a similar logic. By deferring the choice of subject until after painting, Bierstadt made depiction a function of ownership. He correlated the picture's potential meaning—and its monetary value—to its transformation into private property. Furthermore, the move harbors within it an ecological sensibility, one that assumes that a profitable

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<sup>22</sup> This project is focused less on the semiotic structure of new communications technologies such as the telegraph—although these structures do factor into my analysis—and more on the elite social spaces that intersected with these technologies. In this respect, my argument follows the insights of Carolyn Marvin, who emphasizes that “old habits of transaction between groups are projected onto new technologies that alter, or seem to alter, critical social distances.” *When Old Technologies were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5.

interchange between an individual and the natural environment could be manufactured from afar, in a land office or in a studio, with only a minimum degree of regard for the physical characteristics of the land itself.

With this sensibility in mind, Chapter Three also narrates the failure of the Waucoba Mining and Smelting Company. The company's collapse and the disappearance of Bierstadt's partners set in motion a slow march toward failure and financial ruin for the artist. Working through a proxy while living in New York, Bierstadt bought up abandoned Waucoba Company mining claims, which he reconsolidated as the Silver Quartz Mining Company. The company folded almost as soon it appeared, and Bierstadt soon found himself in legal trouble. In 1893, he was the defendant in a lawsuit filed in an English court by creditor who had loaned him money to develop California mining properties.

Bierstadt's abandoned mines and real estate speculations invite a reappraisal of his legacy as an American Western artist. Underpinning both Bierstadt's land dealings and his landscape paintings is the assumption that the value of land need not stem from its immutable material qualities—or its nationalist connotations—but from the social relationships and representational forms that enabled land's circulation as exchangeable commodity. When considered in the light of his mining speculations, Bierstadt appears less a witness to a fading preindustrial frontier—or, conversely, as a complicit enabler of industrialism—and more an agent and a victim of transnational capital's hubristic attitude toward the environment. In this reading, Bierstadt's paintings are ruins-in-waiting, harbingers of a sensibility that was about to run aground on the recalcitrant California desert.

## Methodological Approach

This project originated in part because of a lack of scholarly attention to the formal complexity of Bierstadt's landscapes. Too often, the defining formal and compositional elements of Bierstadt's style have been dismissed by scholars on qualitative grounds. In the eyes of many—if not most—of the critics and art historians who have written about Bierstadt's work during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (not to mention scores of nineteenth-century critics), Bierstadt was not a particularly good painter. By the time Gordon Hendricks published his foundational monograph on the artist in 1974, there was already a widespread distaste for the painter's technique. Virgil Barker had dismissed Bierstadt's brushwork as both "heavy-handed" and "repellent in its dull monotony," while Edgar Richardson had characterized Bierstadt as no more than a "first-rate second-rate artist" who constantly threatened to produce "dreadful" paintings.<sup>23</sup>

Hendricks piled on, suggesting that only Bierstadt's sincere appreciation of the beauty of western space allowed him to transcend his otherwise pedestrian abilities.<sup>24</sup> And when Nancy Anderson and Linda Ferber organized their landmark 1991 retrospective on the artist at the Brooklyn Museum, Michael Brenson proclaimed in his review of the show that Bierstadt "had no artistic imagination, no introspection," that "he was incapable of growth," and that even when his work was "strategically intelligent and technically breathtaking" it remained "artistically and intellectually

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<sup>23</sup> Virgil Barker, *American Painting* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1950), 587; Edgar P. Richardson, *Painting in America* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1956), 230.

<sup>24</sup> Gordon Hendricks, *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of the American West* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1974), 9-10.

dumb.”<sup>25</sup> Later, Eleanor Harvey wondered whether Bierstadt’s methods of self-promotion might be best understood as an effort to divert attention from his deficient technique, and Maggie Cao, in an otherwise compelling reinterpretation of certain marginal aspects of Bierstadt’s artistic practice, characterized him as a “consummate businessman rather [than] a critical thinker” in regards to the production of his studio pictures.<sup>26</sup>

However, incompatibility with standards of connoisseurship does not mean a lack of semiotic and phenomenological complexity. Moreover, scholarship that passes over a close examination of the close proximity of artmaking and commercial practice in Bierstadt’s career risks overlooking crucial components of his relationship to western space. Looking to approach Bierstadt’s pictures differently, I draw from the scholarship of Rachael DeLue and Jennifer Raab who, through a phenomenologically oriented method, highlight how landscape painters working amidst profound cultural, political, and epistemological transformations have treated the landscape medium as a

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Brenson, “He Painted the West that America Wanted,” *The New York Times*, February 8, 1991, 22. His remarks echoed those of the critic John Canaday, who described Bierstadt’s studio pictures as “vulgar, scrappily put together and empty.” Canaday, “Art: Bierstadt’s Large and Small Work,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 1972, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Eleanor Jones Harvey, *The Painted Sketch: American Impressions from Nature, 1830-1880* (Dallas, TX.: Dallas Museum of Art, 1998), 69; Maggie Cao, *The End of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 36. Cao then proposes that “to get past the financial thinking that dominates both the archives and, to some extent, the scholarship, I suggest that we turn away from Bierstadt’s exhibition pieces and commissioned works . . . to pictures never intended for sale and projects beyond painting.” In contrast, I propose that the aesthetic complexity of Bierstadt’s pictures hinges on their maker’s creative engagement with financial thinking.

malleable, individualized technology for formulating new links and distinctions between self and world, often in ways that precede or contradict established ideologies.<sup>27</sup> An object-focused approach, one directed at the very aspects of Bierstadt's pictures that critics and art historians have repeatedly objected to, sheds fresh light on Bierstadt's overlooked pictorial intelligence.

In *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie*, for instance, overlarge passages of undefined and undifferentiated space serve to mark the presence of an epistemological limit, signaling the unknowability of subterranean space; in *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California*, Bierstadt's heavy-handed and invariant brushwork ends up functioning phatically, calling the viewer's attention to the gallery space across which the pictorial message is being transmitted; and the unspecific composition of *Mount Corcoran* works to mark its own contents as unclaimed space, as topography whose meaning is contingent upon its future transformation into private property. These elements read easily as faults by prevailing qualitative standards, but to stop at such judgments is to risk missing how Bierstadt's style engages with a period culture of speculative finance.

This is not to imply, however, that this is a recuperative project, an attempt to champion the merits of an unjustly dismissed artist. A critical and attentive eye to the uniqueness of Bierstadt's pictures brings into sharper focus his subject position in relation to Anglo-American imperialism, revealing what is perhaps a more troubling

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<sup>27</sup> Rachael DeLue and James Elkins, eds., *Landscape Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 108. See also, DeLue, *George Inness and the Science of Landscape* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004; Jennifer Raab, *Frederic Church: The Art and Science of Detail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

picture of the artist than what has appeared previously in scholarship. The formal complexities of Bierstadt's landscapes reveal the depth of his commitment, both aesthetically and economically, to a corrosive logic of financial marketization.

Cast in this light, Bierstadt emerges from this study as somewhat of an anomaly among artists who engaged pictorially with concepts of nineteenth-century finance. When considering the historical intersections of painting and finance capitalism in nineteenth-century American art, art historians have tended to focus on trompe l'oeil depictions of paper currency. Meredith Davis and Walter Benn Michaels, for example, have highlighted historical intersections between trompe l'oeil's unsteady illusionism and period debates over the legitimacy of paper currency, with Davis proposing that currency was "the dominant area where questions of representation and value were being elaborated, challenged, and discussed."<sup>28</sup> Their studies highlight how the problems of representation posed in trompe l'oeil paintings materialized societal concerns about the distinctions between not only authentic and counterfeit manifestations of currency, but legitimate and illegitimate financial

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<sup>28</sup> Meredith Davis, "Fool's Gold: American Trompe L'Oeil Painting in the Gilded Age," (PhD. Diss., Columbia University, 2005), 112. Walter Benn Michaels, for instance, has read this interest as reflective of a gold standard era desire for "a material equivalence" between the representation and the object of representation. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature in the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 162. Recent studies have broadened such an analysis beyond trompe l'oeil. See, for instance, Cao's discussion of the heavily worked surfaces of Ralph Blakelock's paintings and their suggestive resonances with hoarding. Cao, *The End of Landscape*, 113-152. For a study of how the problems of representation central to money play out in period literature, see Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

actors.<sup>29</sup> More broadly, their inquiries constitute part of a broader scholarly interest in the role played by skeptical looking in American culture, particularly in relation to how skepticism—and its counterpart, suspension of disbelief—helped Americans navigate emerging commodity-driven attitudes toward object relations.<sup>30</sup>

With its attentiveness to visual tensions between illusionism and the materiality of paint, trompe l’oeil scholarship proved formative in the development of this project. However, Bierstadt’s paintings move in a different trajectory from the genre in regard to the genre. Ultimately, his works might be read as an inversion of trompe l’oeil’s sensibility, in that they uncritically embrace the representational disruptions that arise from a financially interconnected world. Furthermore, rather than grappling with questions of material authenticity and objecthood, such as those that arose amidst the proliferation of paper currency, Bierstadt’s paintings instead celebrate a culture of investment that forged financial connections across vast continental and oceanic distances. In doing so, his pictures give form to what Arjun Appadurai refers to as “financescapes”—the disruptive and disorienting effects engendered by the rapid

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<sup>29</sup> A broad history of counterfeiting in the United States appears in Stephen Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 125-152. For studies of the role of skeptical looking in early American and antebellum American art, respectively, see Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion, and Visual Perception in Early National America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Peter John Brownlee, “Francis Edmonds and the Speculative Economy of Painting,” *American Art* 21, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 30-53.



cross-border circulation of capital.<sup>31</sup> And they do so uncritically, without seeking to ground the viewer within a skeptical or critical subject position.<sup>32</sup>

In exploring how Bierstadt's landscapes intersect with transatlantic patterns of land speculation, this study contributes to a growing art historical conversation about the historical relationship between artmaking and real estate. Ross Barrett has recently called attention to "painting's capacity to creatively interrogate speculation and finance" in the nineteenth century, proposing that forces of land exchange were as aesthetically formative as the forces of land use. In turn, he cites historical evidence for an interested and informed audience for pictures that dealt with the cultural and economic upheavals provoked by land exchange and real estate speculation.<sup>33</sup> Highlighting artists who took up topics of real estate as a subject for art (and who made speculative real estate investments of their own), Barrett proposes that future scholarship might illuminate "painting's capacity to make palpably visible the power

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<sup>31</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory Culture Society* 7, no. 23 (1990): 295-310.

<sup>32</sup> In this respect, my study differs from Maggie Cao's insightful examination of the disillusion of the landscape medium in the United States at the end of the nineteenth-century, in which she proposes that "frontier development, land speculation, environmental change, and other factors slowly rendered its conventions meaningless." Although I ultimately do not share Cao's claim that the landscape genre had irreconcilable limits that rendered it incapable of adequately picturing the delocalizing forces of modernity, her ideas proved formative in the development of this project. Cao, *The End of Landscape*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ross Barrett, "Bursting the Bubble: John Quidor's Money Dinners and Land Speculation," *American Art* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 30. Recently, Maggie M. Cao, Sophie Cras, and Alex J. Taylor have extended these claims, arguing that "works of art are often the best material evidence of otherwise abstract economic debates or conditions." Cao, Cras, and Taylor, "Art and Economics Beyond the Market," *American Art* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 20-25.

structures and material consequences of financialized land exchange.”<sup>34</sup> Barrett’s approach provides a useful framework for considering how Bierstadt targeted his pictures at an elite audience of financial speculators, a group who was actively looking to assert their cultural prominence as a driving force of economic growth.

Additionally, Bierstadt’s personal involvement in this transatlantic culture of land speculation warrants consideration through an ecocritical lens. Throughout, this project investigates the gap between the optimistic image of investment wealth evident in Bierstadt’s midcareer pictures and the harsh realities on the ground at his Inyo Mountain mines. How did Bierstadt reconcile his vision of speculative wealth with the immutable environmental realities of the American Western environment? In what ways, if any, did the recalcitrant climate of the Eastern California desert inform or inflect Bierstadt’s style? Given the ultimate failure of Bierstadt’s speculations, what insights do his pictures have to offer to a present-day context, in which the financialization of western spaces remains an ever-present issue?<sup>35</sup>

James Nisbet’s concept of the “ecological object” offers a helpful framework for exploring such questions at the level of formal analysis. Nisbet emphasizes that artworks do not represent certain ecological sensibilities, but rather, they are “a material distillation of their own conditions of ecology, be these conditions environmental or theoretical.” In other words, artworks do not represent ecological

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<sup>34</sup> Idem., “Landscape and Real Estate,” *American Art* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 47.

<sup>35</sup> In exploring these questions, this project follows T. J. Demos’ call to “thinking ecologies simultaneously across subjective, social and environmental registers.” T. J. Demos, “Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology: An Introduction,” *Third Text*, 27, no.1 (January 2013): 2.

states, they hardwire a particular ecological worldview into their form and materiality. Consequently, when subjected to art historical analysis, “ecological objects materially condense and make sensible relationships among political, technological and ‘natural systems’ that are otherwise so diffuse as to elude comprehension.”<sup>36</sup>

Assessed as “ecological objects,” Bierstadt’s midcareer landscapes manifest a certain narrowness in outlook; they visualize a sensibility that locates the value of western land in its potential to be integrated into networks of speculative finance, as opposed to its material aspects. Bierstadt’s pictures manifest a certain disregard for and disinterest in the actual, physical properties of land. *Mount Corcoran* exemplifies this sensibility most dramatically. The picture does not depict Inyo Mountain terrain; rather, it analogizes the social spaces and representational forms that made the Inyos legible and potentially valuable as a site of speculative investment.

Scholarly engagement with the financial dimensions of natural resource extraction in the nineteenth-century West requires a transnational approach, not a narrowly national one. Colonial resource extraction is, as Charmaine Nelson emphasizes, deeply imbricated “in complex, intersectional, transnational circuits of imperial trade.” In this context, she continues, “connections *between* various ‘national’ or disparately governed regional sites of empire are as important as the connections

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<sup>36</sup> James Nisbet, *Ecologies, Environments, and Energy Systems in Art of the 1960s and 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 3. Nisbet is notably attentive to the ways in which media and communications technologies as well as transportation systems shape ecologies, making his model particularly useful when approaching Bierstadt. For a similar reading of how artworks manifest ecological systems through their own formal and material conditions, see Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 10.

within them.”<sup>37</sup> The sites in which Bierstadt chose to invest should not be thought of solely as locally bounded entities, but rather as fluid components of a broader transnational political economy. Mines, as Martín Arboleda explains, are “not . . . discrete sociotechnical object[s], but a dense network of territorial infrastructures and spatial technologies vastly dispersed across space.”<sup>38</sup> Each vertically descending mineshaft harbors within it a lateral network of labor, finance, and technology, one whose connections often extend across national borders.

Efforts to analyze and come to terms with these networks often entail a recalibration of the aesthetic and contextual frameworks used to describe and define western space. Lucy Lippard offers an exemplary model for such a recalibration in her book, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*. Taking as her subject the contemporary American Western Southwest, Lippard eschews the mythologized West of the frontier and of cowboy culture, as well as the monumental, cosmic expanses and timescales favored in much of twentieth-century Land Art. Instead, she describes for readers a Western landscape of pits, mines, and holes—the physical traces left by mineral extraction—while attending to the efforts of artists who work to make such traces legible within the public imaginary. Physical sites of extraction are important, she stresses, because they index an unequal economic relationship, a relationship in which resources are dug out,

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<sup>37</sup> Charmaine Nelson, *Slavery, Geography, and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 64.

<sup>38</sup> Martín Arboleda, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism* (New York: Verso Books, 2020), 5.

taken away, and sent elsewhere, often at immense human and environmental cost for those living at or near the site of extraction. Put bluntly, these sites are “local scars” that “cover for global perpetrators.”<sup>39</sup> And these scars are often rendered invisible, whether through public indifference, cultural hegemony, state and corporate censorship, or journalistic and scholarly inattention.

In light of the historical and contemporary injustices of Western resource extraction, and the relative invisibility of these injustices within the public imaginary, Lippard calls for renewed efforts to create “in writing and images a *context* for the microcosmic aspects of global change our western landscapes and rural villages are undergoing.”<sup>40</sup> Sites of extraction need to be framed against the economic networks that they form a part of, she contends. To underscore this idea, Lippard characterizes sites of extraction as “cities upside down.” “The gravel pit,” she continues, “like other mining holes, is the reverse image of the cityscape it creates.”<sup>41</sup> It is the hole dug so that a skyscraper or a road can be built elsewhere. But these holes are never empty, Lippard emphasizes; they become sites where local actors mobilize what cultural, economic, and political capital they have to contest and resist their ongoing exploitation.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 10. Elliot West has also highlighted the historical ways that the Trans-Mississippi West has been defined by its relationship to networks of resource extraction. See West, “Trails and Footprints: The Past of the Future Southern Plains,” *The Future of the Southern Plains*, ed. Sherry L. Smith (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, in cooperation with the William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies, Southern Methodist University, 2003): 17-43.

<sup>40</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 10.

With its attentiveness to the networked character of sites of extraction in the American West, as well as to the violence inflicted and resisted at the sites themselves, Lippard's metaphor of the inverted city offers a useful framework for grappling with Bierstadt's relationship to western space. The archive of Bierstadt's land dealings in the Inyo Mountains bears interconnected traces of the varied local, national, and transatlantic interests that contested the remote Inyo topography. The artist's Inyo mining claims encompassed parts of the former homeland of the Eastern Mono and Western Shoshone, who had been ignored by Spanish and Mexican colonizers before being violently expelled by vigilante prospectors and the California military; the mineshaft locations had been selected by national army officers and dug by immigrant labors from San Francisco and displaced California Indians; the smelting infrastructure was financed by Northeastern and British investors; and the processed ore was destined for Panama, where it would then be carried via transatlantic shipping routes to the United Kingdom.<sup>42</sup> .

With profoundly transnational spaces such as the Inyo Mountains in view, Bierstadt's involvement in western space cannot be addressed merely by tracking the itinerary of his sketching expeditions; rather, they must instead be pieced together through a careful accounting of his subject position in relation to each component of his mines' physical, financial, and transportive infrastructure, with an eye trained on his complicity—even if it was unwitting—in an economic system that catalyzed a genocidal project of land expropriation.

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<sup>42</sup> For a broad accounting of the transnational components of mining in nineteenth-century western spaces, Clark Spence, *British Investments and the American Mining Frontier, 1860-1901* (1958; repr. London, UK: Routledge, 1993).

Assessing to Bierstadt's place within economic and political networks of expropriation and extraction entails also a revised approach to the art historical study of the archives of western industrialism—defined here as both the picture collections compiled by railroad corporations and state-sponsored surveys, and, in a broader Foucauldian sense, as the systems “enabling and controlling the production of knowledge” within the context of natural resource extraction.<sup>43</sup> Recent scholarship has analyzed the nature of the relationship between artist and archive, analyzing the forms of creative agency afforded to survey image makers as they devised visual forms that would legitimize the authority of the survey archive, with Robin Kelsey's *Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890* offering the paradigmatic example of this approach.<sup>44</sup> Kelsey's study is notable in how it correlates the meaning of archival imagery to the marginal subject positions of image makers within survey bureaucracies, a project that entails a careful accounting of the social and professional positionings of artists within the lived realities of knowledge production in the American West.<sup>45</sup> But unlike the protagonists of Kelsey's study,

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<sup>43</sup> Robin Kelsey, *Archive Style: Photographs & Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850 1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>44</sup> Kelsey's inquiry is enriched and complicated by Glenn Willumson's recent analysis of the official corporate picture archives of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific Railroads. Analyzing the role of corporate, engineering, and advertising executives in circulating pictures from corporate archives, Willumson highlights how such imagery took on meanings that are not always reducible to the tight-coupling of artist and archive prioritized in Kelsey's study. Willumson, *Iron Muse: Photographing the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Importantly, Kelsey charts how this marginal vantage afforded opportunities to produce imagery that contested the social and labor strictures of Anglo-American imperial expansion.

who sketched, engraved, and photographed under contract with specific surveys, Bierstadt never made pictures for western surveys.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, he appears to have turned down such opportunities when they arose.<sup>47</sup> To understand Bierstadt's position vis a vis western exploration, then, it is necessary to examine a different type of archive: the ad hoc networks of information exchange that flared up on the margins of state-sponsored surveys as speculators attempted to gather exclusive information about potentially profitable mining lands. If Kelsey attends to the formative marginality of artists within state surveys, this study attends to the formative marginality of speculators' archives in the context of American Western exploration.

Mining Bierstadt's place within such archives poses certain challenges. Records of Bierstadt's land deals are scattered and fragmentary, dispersed across his financial correspondence. It is often difficult to know whether a particular speculation was successful (or whether it even took place). The incompleteness of this archive is in large part due to a calamitous 1882 fire that destroyed his Hudson River estate and along with it most of his personal archive.<sup>48</sup> But it also stems from the practices of

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<sup>46</sup> In August of 1872, Bierstadt travelled in the High Sierras with Clarence King, then the head of the 40th Parallel Survey. King noted in his daybook that Bierstadt had offered him use of his sketches in his official report, but there is no indication that King ever did so, or that the offer was anything other than an informal one. Hendricks, *Albert Bierstadt*, 217

<sup>47</sup> In 1871, he reportedly turned down an offer to accompany Ferdinand Vandeverer Hayden's Geological Survey, leaving the landscape painter Thomas Moran to accompany the expedition. Joni Kinsey, *Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 186.

<sup>48</sup> Period estimates varied, but the fire reportedly destroyed between \$150,000 and \$300,00 of paintings, ethnographic objects, studies, photographs, books, and



nineteenth-century speculation, wherein, as Richard White emphasizes, secrecy and the destruction of documents were expected behaviors.<sup>49</sup> Despite their scarcity, surviving fragments of Bierstadt's correspondence still offer crucial insights into not only his business dealings, but also his cultural self-positioning within the context of financial practice. These insights emerge when Bierstadt's correspondence is read chronotopically, with an eye to how its rhetoric structures temporal and spatial markers for the intended recipient.<sup>50</sup>

By reading textual records of Bierstadt's financial dealings in this way, this study departs from past scholarship on the artist, which, when considering textual sources, tends to privilege as source material the art critical reception of Bierstadt's pictures. To understand Bierstadt's creative engagement with speculation, it is essential to instead read his pictures against the textual representations of landscape that appeared in speculative discourse—in mining prospectuses and reports, in private

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correspondence. "Bierstadt's Loss by Fire," *The New York Times*, November 11, 1882, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Richard White, "Corporations, Corruption, and the Modern Lobby" (lecture, March 19, 2009, Emory University, Atlanta, GA). Indeed, the scarcity of Bierstadt's surviving financial correspondence may be attributable to the artist's evident desire for secrecy in his business dealings. "I beg that you will let this be strictly confidential," he asked an unidentified correspondent in 1887, before expressing his desire to hire a Washington lobbyist to encourage Congress to purchase one of his paintings. In the letter, Bierstadt seems to hint at his willingness to offer a bribe: "I am quite prepared to appreciate in a substantial manner what is done for me." Bierstadt to unidentified recipient, c. 1887, Gordon Hendricks Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Box 20, Folder 16.

<sup>50</sup> Here, I draw from Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "chronotype," a central locus of spatial and temporal markers that unite to grant a narrative its governing structure. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

correspondence between speculators, in annotated maps, and in the columns of booster publications. Constructions of landscape in nineteenth-century art criticism offer only a partial understanding of the aesthetic complexity of Bierstadt's pictures. (Indeed, Chapter Two looks to pinpoint the limits of period criticism as an interpretive tool). The following example, a single letter from a larger conversation that is now lost, reveals the extent to which even small fragments of financial correspondence can bring to light new facets of an artist's artistic persona.

### **The Riches of Financial Archives: Bierstadt and the Paris Gas Company**

On March 9, 1869, while staying at the Grand Hotel in Paris, Bierstadt wrote his friend and occasional business partner, the expatriate armor collector William Riggs, to share his intentions regarding a potential stock speculation.<sup>51</sup> "Dear Mr. Riggs," he began, writing from his room and studio at Le Grand Hôtel on rue Scribe,

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<sup>51</sup> An heir of a New York banking fortune, Riggs shared Bierstadt's interest in the American West. In 1853, he joined a private reconnaissance expedition to map a railway route across New Mexico Territory. William returned with a collection of Native American weapons and clothing. After losing his collection in a warehouse fire, he shifted his collecting interests to European armor. In less than a decade, he established himself as one of the most prominent and well-connected collectors in Europe, and drew the attention of Napoleon III. Bashford Dean, "Mr. Riggs as a Collector of Armor," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 9, no. 3 (March 1914): 67; idem., "William Henry Riggs," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 19, no. 12 (December 1924): 300-307; Elena Carrara, "'Mon cher ami et frère d'armes,'" Letters from Costantino Ressiman to William Riggs, Collectors of Arms and Armor in Nineteenth-Century Paris," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Journal* 47 (2012): 170. For descriptions of Riggs' journey on the "Beale-Heap Expedition," see Edward Leo Lyman, *The Overland Journey from Utah to California: Wagon Travel from the City of Saints to the City of Angels* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2004), 91-92 and Gwinn Harris Heap, *Central Route to the Pacific* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, Grambo, and Co., 1854).

“I shall not be able to visit the new Gas Works tomorrow morning as I had intended.” Bierstadt could still offer something useful, though. “If I am rightly informed,” he continued, “the present high price of Paris Gas stock is entirely unwarrantable.” The predicted fall was steep: “a few weeks will find it from 3 to 400 francs less per share.” Bierstadt told Riggs he planned to sell his shares, and asked that he keep the plan remain secret. “I tell you this confidentially,” he concluded. “When I see you I will tell you why this will take place.”<sup>52</sup>

Bierstadt’s tip makes little sense. Paris Gas Company (PGC) stock was one of the most desirable long-term investments in both the Second Empire and the Third Republic. Between 1855 and 1890, the PGC outpaced nearly all other French corporations in growth and profit and never once had an unprofitable year, thanks to a state-sanctioned monopoly over gas production.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, PGC stock offered more lucrative returns than all but the most successful Haussmann-era real estate, consistently paying annual dividends of nearly 10 percent.<sup>54</sup> And yet, despite all of

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<sup>52</sup> Albert Bierstadt to William Riggs, Feb. 18, 1869, Gordon Hendricks Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Box 20, Folder 9.

<sup>53</sup> Lenard Berlanstein, *Big Business and Industrial Conflict in Nineteenth-Century France: A Social History of the Parisian Gas Company* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 17. This monopoly which ensured that the PGC received gas contracts for all of the major Haussmannization redevelopment projects, including the illumination of the Grands Boulevards, which collectively consumed more than 130,000 cubic meters of gas annually. Wolfgang Schivelbush, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth-Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988; reprint, 1995), 29-30.

<sup>54</sup> Berlanstein, *Big Business and Industrial Conflict*, 27-28.

this, Bierstadt was predicting a crash of roughly one quarter of the stock's current value.<sup>55</sup>

Bierstadt was aware of the company's prominence. Although he had to cancel his visit, his plan to see "the new gas works" was part of an established practice of Parisian technological tourism.<sup>56</sup> By 1869 the PGC had extended its production and distribution infrastructure into the city outskirts.<sup>57</sup> Their massive *usine à gaz*—storage tanks also known as gasholders or gasometers—attracted artists, tourists, and foreign dignitaries alike.<sup>58</sup> Travel guides illustrated notable gasometers and touted the vast

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<sup>55</sup> In 1869 the average value of Parisian Gas Company (PGC) stock was roughly 1,500 francs. *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>56</sup> It is unclear which gas works Bierstadt and Riggs had planned to visit. It seems likely that they would have gone to the largest—La Villette—for it was a popular tourist attraction at the time. However, Bierstadt describes visiting a "new" gas works, and La Villette had been in operation since the mid-1850s.

<sup>57</sup> The PGC built the majority of these structures on the outskirts of the city, for reasons that included physics, risk management, and class. For an account of the risks of gas production, and their relationships to class tensions and urban development, see Fressoz, Jean-Baptiste, "The Gas Lighting Controversy: Technological Risk, Expertise, and Regulation in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London," *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 5 (July 2007): 729-755. Ten gasworks were in operation by 1874. Five were within the city limits, and five more were in the nearby environs: "La ville de Paris possède aujourd'hui dix usines à gaz: usines dans Paris, Saint-Maudé, La Villette, Ivry, les Ternes, Passy, Vaugirard, Belleville; usines hors Paris, Saint denis, Boulogne, Maisons-Alfort." Adophe Joanne, *Paris illustré en 1870 et 1875: Guide de l'Etranger et du Parisien* (Paris: Hachette, 1875), 190; "Gas Manufacturing in Paris," *Engineering and Mining Journal* 18 (November 21, 1874): 204.

<sup>58</sup> In 1863, for example, a delegate of Annamite ambassadors visited the facilities at La Villette, the largest at the time. "Visite des Ambassadeurs Annamites," *Journal Universal*, October 3, 1863, 236.

extent of Paris' gas production and distribution capabilities.<sup>59</sup> In their monumental size and productive capacity, gasworks offered visitors a spectacle of rationalized, state-managed capitalism in line with other large-scale industrial structures of the period.<sup>60</sup>

While the gasworks themselves offered a national and public spectacle of centralized industry, ownership of PGC stock communicated elite social status. Shares were scarce and difficult to come by, due to the fact that the PGC's charter strictly limited the distribution of new stock in order to inflate the asset's value.<sup>61</sup> Those lucky enough to acquire shares typically held them for decades as long-term investments, leading to a concentration of shares among a small number of French royalty, upper-class businessman, and prominent bankers.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> For an example of such a guide, see Joanne, *De Paris à Bordeaux*, 243. Notably, Le Grand Hôtel, Bierstadt's residence in Paris, was famous for its extensive gas consumption. La Presse reported that the hotel used more cubic meters of gas annually than the entire city of Orléans. "Nouvelles du Jour," *La Presse* (Paris, France), August 26, 1883, 3, cited in Berlanstein, *Big Business and Industrial Conflict*, 18.

<sup>60</sup> In these observations, I draw from Tamara Plankins Thornton, "Capitalist Aesthetics: Americans Look at the London and Liverpool Docks," in *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America*, eds. Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith (Chicago, Ill: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 171-196. A broader discussion of the relationship between tourism and large-scale industrial structures appears in David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), especially 112-116.

<sup>61</sup> On the practice of limiting the issuance of stock in the nineteenth century, see Edward Chancellor, *Devil take the Hindmost: A History of Financial Speculation* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1999), 129-130.

<sup>62</sup> As late as 1889, just 1,047 individuals possessed 81% of all PCG stock. Berlanstein, *Big Business and Industrial Conflict*, 29.

The exclusivity of PGC stock is what makes Bierstadt's letter so compelling. Bierstadt had likely just acquired the cherished shares; he had arrived in Paris the previous November. Yet he planned to sell immediately.<sup>63</sup> Trading based on anticipated short-term price fluctuations was rare not just among PGC shareholders, but among the French financial elite in general.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, Bierstadt flouted these norms and treated PCG shares as a speculative asset, locating their value in their immediate exchangeability. Given his desire for secrecy—"I tell you this confidentially"—it is possible that he intended to short the stock, a high-risk transaction that involves selling borrowed shares in the hopes of rebuying them later at a lower price.

Notably, Bierstadt's interest in profiting off of an anticipated short-term price drop puts him on the vanguard of a radical transformation that was brewing in the realm of French finance. Two years before Bierstadt wrote to Stoddard, the French government had deregulated limited liability corporations, granting them greater

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<sup>63</sup> Bierstadt to Riggs, March 8, 1869.

<sup>64</sup> The rates of return for French government bonds or securities for state-contracted corporations were reliable enough that speculative betting on short-term price fluctuations was widely perceived as unnecessary. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 68. Perhaps Bierstadt expected that mounting political instability would provoke a market crash. Antimonopoly sentiment toward PGC was certainly fierce in 1869, the eve of the Franco-Prussian War, due largely to the company's high utility rates. But if Bierstadt had bet on political unrest, the predicted downtown never happened, even during the Siege of Paris, when PGC rationed fuel and shut down gaslights throughout the city. On the rationing of gas during the siege, see Hollis Clayson, *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege, 1870-71* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 53-55.

freedom to raise capital through stock offerings.<sup>65</sup> As corporations broadened their stock offerings, speculative trading—trades made in anticipation of near-term price fluctuations—started to become more common.<sup>66</sup> The deregulation of the French financial industry had significant cultural consequences. The legitimization of speculation gave rise to a new monied class in the city: those who had built their wealth from high-risk trading rather than dividends and long-term bond yields.<sup>67</sup> The rapid emergence of this new financial class had the consequent effect of disrupting the professional and social markers that had previously distinguished between legitimate and illegitimate financial behaviors in Parisian society.

Edgar Degas famously captured the blurring of professional and social markers caused by the deregulation of French financial markets in his *Portraits at the Stock Exchange (Portraits, à la Bourse)* (fig. 1.5). As Marnin Young has recently demonstrated, Degas' painting portrays the interior of the Paris Bourse, the city's long-running and state-sanctioned site of financial activity. Yet Degas departs from the Bourse's well-established connotations of legitimacy by imbuing the scene with formal and narrative markers of inscrutability. In Degas' rendering, the above-board trading floor of the Bourse becomes a space of clandestine, secretive, and potentially

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<sup>65</sup> Marnin Young, "Capital in the Nineteenth Century: Edgar Degas's Portraits at the Stock Exchange in 1879," Nonsite.org, December 15, 2014, last accessed 2/22/2018, <http://nonsite.org/article/capital-in-the-nineteenth-century>.

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between speculative trading and long-term investment in Paris during the late-1860s, see Pierre-Cyrille Hautcoeur and Angelo Riva, "The Paris Financial Market in the Nineteenth Century: Complementarities and Competition in Microstructures," *Economic History Review* 65, no. 4 (2012): 1326-1353.

<sup>67</sup> Young, "Capital in the Nineteenth Century," 2011.

illicit activity, a sign of the blurring of boundaries caused by the entry of speculative traders.<sup>68</sup> Whether Bierstadt also recognized this shift in financial markets and attempted to capitalize or simply misunderstood the appropriate use of his shares cannot be known. But his willingness to use an above-board and well-regarded long-term investment asset for a newer and more clandestine form of financial dealing is striking, for it prefigures the broader disruption in French financial culture that Degas captured a decade later.

*Portraits at the Stock Exchange* also introduces, by way of contrast, a key component of Bierstadt's creative engagement with speculation. Whereas Degas turned a critical eye in his picture toward the cultural transformations underway in the Bourse, Bierstadt wholeheartedly embraced the financial opportunities promised by speculation in western lands, and his paintings reflect his confidence in these endeavors. In Bierstadt's landscapes, the challenges associated with discerning the value of western mining land are acknowledged, but they are reworked into signals of the suitability of such land for speculative investment. To understand how this reworking operates pictorially, it is necessary to turn to Bierstadt's first large-scale exhibition painting of the Rocky Mountains near Denver, Colorado: *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie*.

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<sup>68</sup> The painting portrays Ernest May, a young French investment banker and a member of the emergent class of more speculative-minded traders. According to Young, Degas' portrait plays on May's status as new class of trader, using it to speak to "a sense of how unknowable, secretive, and chaotic finance was coming to be seen" during this period of financial deregulation. Ibid.



## Chapter 2

### ***A STORM IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS, MOUNT ROSALIE AND THE ABANDONMENT OF THE WEST***

In the foreground of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie* (fig. 2.1) (hereafter *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*), a deer carcass, two dyed robes, and a saddle lie abandoned in the grass (fig. 2.2). Below, three American Indian figures dash down the hillside, seemingly in pursuit of two horses (fig. 2.3). Having just left the foreground, the figures open a space for the viewer, an opportunity to stride easily onto the vacated hilltop. Stepping between the calm waters of a mountain pool and a slump of exposed bedrock, the viewer is greeted with an expansive view of the distant topography as well as a collection of objects abruptly left behind. *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* stages a timely arrival, drawing the viewer's projective body into the picture, so that they might claim the contents of the landscape from within.

Initially, this effect adds up to something largely conventional in terms of the genre. The running figures serve a well-established settler-colonial narrative. They abandon the hilltop to enable the arrival of the spectator within the landscape.<sup>69</sup> And in doing so, the figures imply that the displacement of the American Indians from their western site (in this instance, a pair of mountain lakes west of Denver known as Chicago Lakes) was a natural, previously occurring phenomenon, an opportunity for,

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<sup>69</sup> In this reading, I follow Martin Berger's analysis of the racial discourses of whiteness that are encoded into the conventions of nineteenth-century landscape painting. Martin A. Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 43-79.

rather than a forced outcome of, colonization.<sup>70</sup> In *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, the West is the viewer's for the taking.

However, something is amiss. Time, when experienced from the imagined perspective of this elevated hilltop, is askew. Within the picture, both the immediate past and near future loom threateningly over the present. The figures have not run far. (Are they chasing their horses, or do they flee alongside them?) Whatever provoked the disturbance happened recently. If, as some speculate, a massive thunderclap has just rocked the landscape, startling the horses, its aural echoes must still reverberate through the scene.<sup>71</sup> The relative safety of the vacated foreground is in question. Meanwhile, writhing storm clouds encroach upon the sunlit valley, casting impenetrable shadows over large portions of the topography. If the storm continues to grow, as the towering clouds suggest that it might, most of the terrain will soon be removed from view. Invited to step into the scene, the viewer claims vantage whose past safety and future utility are narratively called into question. The picture suggests that its window for occupation is narrow. Looking out from what is conventionally a commanding and all-encompassing vantage, the viewer confronts a scene that resists

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<sup>70</sup> For a concise overview of the settler-colonial functions of American Indian figures within nineteenth-century paintings, see Julie Schimmel, "Inventing 'the Indian,'" in *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier*, ed. William Truettner (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 149-190.

<sup>71</sup> A thunderclap is hypothesized in Thomas B. Hess, "Art/Brooklyn Heights," *New York*, August 30, 1876, 59-60 and Patricia Trenton and Peter H. Hassrick, *The Rocky Mountains: A Vision for Artists in the Nineteenth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 365, n. 113. On the importance of thinking aurally when viewing nineteenth-century landscapes, see, Michael Gaudio, "At the Mouth of the Cave: Listening to Thomas Cole's *Kaaterskill Falls*," *Art History*, 33, no. 3 (June 2010): 448-465.

ocular mastery. In other words, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* stages the failure of the elevated foreground as the painting's privileged narrative center. How and why the image operates in this way is what I aim to explore in this chapter.

The threat imposed upon the embedded spectator in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* is best understood in relation to the fraught economic conditions of the Rocky Mountains in the 1860s, particularly the problems that prospectors and mining investors faced in locating and discerning the value of subterranean mineral deposits. These epistemological challenges shaped a visit to Denver that Bierstadt made during his second tour of the West, which he undertook in 1863 with the New York writer Fitz Hugh Ludlow. The circumstances of their Denver stay, which remain understudied in scholarship on the artist, illuminate how the inherent environmental uncertainties of lode mining—the physical process of extracting mineral deposits from hard rock underground—informed Bierstadt and Ludlow's experiences of the region. Both men would go on to present the Rockies as a region whose economic value was enticing but no longer clearly discernible from the surface of the earth. With the fraught history of lode mining in mind, the visual and narrative threat posed to the foreground of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* reads as a means of staging an encounter with unknowable subterranean spaces. Put differently, the limitations of the foreground vantage point analogize the subject position of the prospector searching for surface traces of underground riches.

The significance of the abandoned campsite, however, lies elsewhere—in New York City. There, two years prior, Bierstadt had had a transformative encounter with American Indians in the Indian Department of the Metropolitan Sanitary Fair. Over the course of three weeks, Bierstadt managed a troupe of American Indian dancers of

mixed tribal affiliation. Through this experience, Bierstadt confronted indigenous peoples not as passive ethnographic subjects, but as working performers—individuals whose agency within the context of contract labor allowed them to shape, to a degree, the terms of their public self-presentation. Bierstadt found the experience deeply frustrating. The performers’ refusal to let themselves become fully commodified as an entertainment spectacle impacted the profitability of his venture. Following the fair, Bierstadt would distance himself from the commercial enterprise of such displays and the cross-cultural labor relationships that they entailed. His decision to do so would inform the conceptualization of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* two years later. The picture narratively and compositionally marginalizes American Indian figures, and it does so in a way that aligns the picture more closely to the landscape genre than to an economy of performance. In this sense, it is possible to read *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* as a continuation of Bierstadt’s dismissal of the value of American Indian voices in his artistic practice.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I claimed that Bierstadt’s landscape paintings should be understood in relation to the social life of real estate; specifically, the social and representational forces that work to transform immobile, place-bound sites into mobile, exchangeable commodities.<sup>72</sup> *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* marks Bierstadt’s first step in this direction. The picture takes one of the fundamental premises of nineteenth-century American landscape painting—the viewer as an

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<sup>72</sup> In using the term “social life” I draw from Igor Kopytoff’s analysis of the cultural biography of things. Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-94.

imagined entrant into the scene—and reworks it, creating a picture that questions whether the true value of the West lies underground, beyond the immediate reach of those who stand atop the surface of the earth.

### **Bierstadt, Fitz Hugh Ludlow, and Front Range Mining Speculation**

*A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* derives from studies that Bierstadt made during a three-week sketching trip in June of 1863 on the eastern slope of the Rockies near Denver. (Hereafter, I refer to this part of the Rockies as the “Front Range.”) The sketching trip was part of a six-month journey that took Bierstadt and his traveling companion, the New York writer Fitz Hugh Ludlow (fig. 2.4), from Kansas along the Platte River, over the Rockies to Salt Lake City, up to San Francisco and into Yosemite, and then north to the Columbia River before returning to the Northeast.<sup>73</sup> Ludlow, who wrote a series of travel articles during their trip for the New York *Post* and the San Francisco *Golden Era*, noted that Denver was a brief layover and a chance to restock supplies before crossing the Rockies. Ludlow also explained that he and Bierstadt also hoped to see “the remarkable scenery and geological formations lying between [Pike’s Peak] and Denver” and, notably, to tour “the chief Colorado gold mines and their business nucleus at Central City.”<sup>74</sup>

Commingling sightseeing and an investigation of mineral extraction, Ludlow’s remark alludes to a formative aspect of their time in Denver: their close proximity to

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<sup>73</sup> Nancy K. Anderson and Linda Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art and Enterprise* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 177-179.

<sup>74</sup> Fitz Hugh Ludlow, *The Heart of the Continent: A Record of Travel Across the Plains and in Oregon, with an Examination of the Mormon Principal* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1873), 193.

mining operations. The city's recent attempts to develop and profit from a mining economy would inform his written accounts of the region. In particular, the city's nascent mining industry fostered an awareness in Ludlow of the challenges of discerning the monetary value of nature through the firsthand, empirical observation of surface topography.

Despite their extensive travels through the Front Range, Bierstadt and Ludlow's time in the Rockies near Denver has received comparatively little scholarly attention.<sup>75</sup> Histories of their 1863 journey (Bierstadt's second tour of the West) often pass over this three-week stay, focusing instead on their time in Yosemite Valley.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* is rarely discussed in relation to the specific place that the painting depicts; rather, psycho-biographical interpretations predominate.<sup>77</sup> Thus, both the picture and Bierstadt's time in Denver invite an analysis more closely attuned to the historical particularities of the Front Range, particularly

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<sup>75</sup> Two exceptions are worth noting, although they do not discuss Front Range mining: Trenton and Hassrick, *The Rocky Mountains* and Nicole A. Parks, "Albert Bierstadt's Colorado," in *Colorado: The Artist's Muse*, ed. Peter H. Hassrick (Denver, CO.: Petrie Institute of Western American Art, Denver Art Museum, 2008), 47-54.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Nancy K Anderson, *Albert Bierstadt: Cho-looke, the Yosemite Fall* (San Diego: The Gallery, 1986) and Richard A. Fine, "Albert Bierstadt, Fitz Hugh Ludlow and the American Western Landscape," *American Studies* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1974): 91-99.

<sup>77</sup> The storm in the picture is typically read as an expression of Bierstadt's tumultuous love life, given that Bierstadt named the picture after Rosalie Osborne, Ludlow's wife. In 1866, Osborne divorced Ludlow and married Bierstadt. Gordon Hendricks, *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of the American West* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988), 165-197.

how the region's identity during the mid-1860s arose from a tension between dreams of lucrative speculative investment and the immutable realities of the environment.

When Bierstadt and Ludlow toured in the Front Range in June of 1863, they encountered a region facing economic collapse. Established in 1858 and officially incorporated in 1861, Denver shaped and was shaped through national flows of finance capital. One of several speculative town sites that appeared amidst the Pike's Peak Gold Rush of 1858-59, Denver quickly emerged as the region's foremost mining community. Located at the confluence of Cherry Creek, which provided access to mining communities in the mountains, and the South Platte, which provided access to the plains, Denver functioned as a vital communicative, financial, and logistical hub connecting the Rockies to key Midwestern and Northeastern banking centers.<sup>78</sup> However, Denver's future was in limbo by 1863. Shortly after the Pike's Peak gold rush, miners exhausted placer deposits—loose, eroded gold flakes in streambed sediment—in the foothills of the Rockies. As early as 1859, local prospectors recognized that the region's mining future would depend on extracting ore from hard rock underground. This process became known as lode mining.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> For a history of early Denver urbanization, see Stephen J. Leonard and Thomas J. Noel, *Denver: Mining Camp to Metropolis* (Denver: University of Colorado Press, 1990), 20-29. See also Kathleen A. Brosnan, *Uniting Mountain & Plain: Cities, Law and Environmental Change along the Front Range* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 10-63.

<sup>79</sup> Elliot West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, & The Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: The University of Kansas Press, 1998), 235.

Lode mining is an industry defined by and through environmental uncertainty.<sup>80</sup> Encased underground, subterranean deposits often leave few visible signs of their size and extent on the surface of the earth. Consequently, lode mining does not begin with the knowledge of a mineral deposit, such as the discovery of a profitable vein on the surface; rather, lode mining has to produce such knowledge.<sup>81</sup> Buried underground, lode deposits are, as Kent A. Curtis emphasizes, “functionally invisible” to prospectors.<sup>82</sup> Their inscrutability from the surface makes lode deposits unique among extractive commodities such as timber. In the nineteenth century, locating mere traces of subterranean ore required a significant outlay of capital, labor, and natural resources to tunnel underground. Moreover, if after this initial outlay a prospector managed to locate preliminary evidence of a mineral vein in hard rock, they faced additional challenges. Additional shafts needed to be dug, illuminated, pumped, supported, and ventilated, and ore needed to be assayed before the full profitability of a particular vein could be estimated. In addition, there were the costs of hiring laborers, securing a land claim, litigating legal disputes over claim ownership, and, if one managed to successfully locate a viable deposit, actually processing and

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<sup>80</sup> The following summary draws from Kent Curtis’ analysis of the relationship of risk, environment, and capital in lode mining, *Gambling on Ore: The Nature of Metal Mining in the United States, 1860-1910* (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2013), 6-20.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



transporting the extracted ore.<sup>83</sup> All of this required an immense outlay of capital. Ironically, searching for valuable commodities in subterranean spaces required burying money underground in the form of built infrastructure.<sup>84</sup> With the exhaustion of placer deposits, then, prospective miners and local boosters faced the challenge of not merely locating subterranean mineral deposits, but also obtaining financing for the construction of expensive lode mining infrastructure.

Buoyed by the recent successes of the Pike's Peak gold rush, outside investors were initially willing to take on these risks. During the early 1860s, credit poured into the Front Range from the Northeast as investors incorporated joint-stock mining companies.<sup>85</sup> But by 1863, the flow of capital had slowed. The first lode miners had struggled to locate profitable gold veins, much less work them effectively.<sup>86</sup> Their failures received extensive press attention and led many prospective investors—who were already reluctant to invest due to the volatile economic and political climate of

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<sup>83</sup> Environmental historian Eric Nystrom offers a concise overview of the logistics of lode in Nystrom, *Seeing Underground, Maps, Models, and Mining Engineering in America* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>84</sup> Curtis, *Gambling on Ore*, 6.

<sup>85</sup> The mining historian Clark Spence discusses early lode mining near Denver in Spence, *British Investments and the American Mining Frontier* (London: Routledge, reprint, 1993, first pub. 1958) and Spence, "The British and Colorado Mining Bureau," *The Colorado Magazine* 33, no. 2 (April 1958): 81-92. For a reassessment of Spence's findings, see Roger Burt, "British Investment in the American Mining Frontier," *Business and Economic History* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 515-525.

<sup>86</sup> Spence attributes such failures to the inexperience of outside investors in managing mining enterprises. Spence, "The British and Colorado Mining Bureau," 82.

the Civil War—to look elsewhere.<sup>87</sup> Compounding matters, the federal government had yet to select a route for a proposed transcontinental railroad. Although Denver citizens lobbied aggressively during the 1860s for the line to pass through their city, Congress tabled the issue during the war, leaving the city's integration into a national transportation network in limbo. As a consequence of these factors—the failures of lode mining, the Civil War, and the as-yet undecided transcontinental railway route—the future of the Front Range was in doubt. When Bierstadt and Ludlow arrived in Denver in June of 1863, the peaks of the Rockies, which once signified wealth and a path to regional prominence, promised little more than economic uncertainty.

Given this precarious situation, Denver boosters likely saw the arrival of two well-connected and culturally prominent New Yorkers as an opportunity to reinvigorate flagging interest in the Front Range. To entice Bierstadt and Ludlow to spend time in the region, John Evans, Colorado's territorial governor, personally loaned the two men a wagon and horses for their visit. Evans also hired guides to lead a multi-day excursion through the mining districts near Pike's Peak.<sup>88</sup> If Evans aimed to use Bierstadt and Ludlow's presence to promote the region, he largely succeeded: Both men went on to produce works that signaled the region's economic potential; however, they did so in ways that navigated the epistemological challenges posed by the region's shift toward lode mining technologies.

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<sup>87</sup> On the dependence of early western cities on Northeastern capital, see William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).

<sup>88</sup> Trenton and Hassrick, *The Rocky Mountains*, 140.

Ludlow's descriptions of Denver for the *Leader* and the *Post*, which he subsequently published in a book-length account titled *The Heart of the Continent* (1870), drew attention to the partial nature of geological knowledge along the Front Range. His text accomplishes this by incorporating themes of fragmentation into its own narrative structure. He disperses brief descriptions of exposed rock outcroppings throughout the hundred or so pages that he devotes to his Denver stay. Scattered across the text, they pop up unexpectedly within descriptions of mountain scenery and lengthy retellings of a day's travels. Vanishing almost as quickly as they appear, these geological observations offer momentary digressions from the overarching narrative. A reader hunting for an assessment of the Front Range's economic future needs to follow Ludlow's path through the Rockies, gathering a loose collection of partial descriptions, none of which cohere into a conclusive picture of the region's economic value.<sup>89</sup>

Through these fragmentary descriptions, Ludlow initially casts an optimistic view of Front Range mineral resources. On several occasions, he describes promising signs of untapped mineral wealth. During a tour of a mine north of Denver, for example, Ludlow reports traces of coal seams in exposed bedrock. These seams suggest to him "that this mineral [coal] is abundant about Denver, and may be

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<sup>89</sup> For a useful account of how forms of natural history description materialize epistemological limits, see Michael Gaudio, "Swallowing the Evidence: William Bartram and the Limits of Enlightenment," *Winterthur Portfolio* 36, no. 1 (Spring, 2011): 1-17.

profitably mined.”<sup>90</sup> Similarly, layers of weathered shale on the plains just east of the city indicated the presence of rich petroleum deposits.<sup>91</sup>

However, Ludlow also points to legal and scientific limitations to the region’s economic potential. After visiting a second coal mine near Denver, Ludlow reported that ongoing disputes over claim ownership had delayed the construction of local mining infrastructure in the area.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, while there were promising traces of mineral deposits scattered across the terrain, Ludlow emphasized that the Front Range still lacked systematic knowledge that could help predict the locations of profitable deposits. “Comparatively little has been done for the geology of this region,” he explained, “scientific distinctions in that science have no more familiarized us with the multitudinous ranges than have those of geography.”<sup>93</sup> Ludlow found himself unable to test his isolated observations against a more systemic understanding of the region. Individual topographic features might inspire ruminations on what may lie underneath the scenery, but he reminds his readers that such possibilities cannot yet be tested against an overarching model.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ludlow, *The Heart of the Continent*, 186.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>94</sup> On the emergence of systems thinking in nineteenth-century geological science, a development that postdates Bierstadt’s and Ludlow’s 1863 journey, see John Ott, *Manufacturing the Modern Patron in Victorian California: Cultural Philanthropy, Industrial Capital, and Social Authority* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2014), 121-76.

Indeed, in 1863 a systematic geological study of the region had yet to take place. Prior military expeditions had focused on the Rockies to the north and south, nearer to the Missouri and the North Platte Rivers. These expeditions focused largely on mapping potential trade routes and devoted only minimal resources to mining matters.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, the prospectors who had incited the 1858-59 gold rush explored the Front Range in fragments, moving from one streambed placer deposit to another. The production of geological knowledge thus accumulated piecemeal, as prospectors tested streambeds and outcroppings, told tall tales, passed on rumors, and shared personal observations and theories.<sup>96</sup> The situation did not change with the shift from placer to lode mining. Company operators tested and worked successive lode mining sites largely through trial and error, even as the industry sought to present itself as a more rationalized and systematized alternative to placer mining.<sup>97</sup>

Yet in Ludlow's account, the fragmentary nature of these accounts ultimately does not function to discourage investment; rather, the dispersal of these geological observations throughout *The Heart of the Continent* can be understood as a promotional tactic in its own right. Nineteenth-century lode mining boosters often sought to fashion the fragmentary or nonexistent information into a signal that a particular locale was actually an ideal destination for capital investment. To do so,

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<sup>95</sup> William H. Goetzmann, *Army Exploration in the American West, 1803-1863* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 65-108, 262-304, and 341-374.

<sup>96</sup> On the role of rumor in placer mining rushes, see Curtis, *Gambling on Ore*, 57-60.

<sup>97</sup> Jason Weems details the tension between the empirical realities of lode mining and its rationalized self-presentation in Weems, "Stratifying the West: Clarence King, Timothy O'Sullivan, and History," *American Art*, 29, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 34-41.

boosters infused their descriptions of mining terrain with a particular temporality: the imminent arrival of accurate and publicly available knowledge.

This temporality took the form of certain rhetorical tropes that surface in booster literature. One of these tropes was for prospectuses to first offer anecdotal information pointing to the presence of abundant mineral deposits, followed by a claim that a more comprehensive survey was about to take place. For instance, the Santa La Saria Mining Company of Colorado stated that a prominent mining engineer had just surveyed their property, but that he had not been able to compile his findings in time for publication.<sup>98</sup> Likewise, the Reciprocity Mining Company of Canada East claimed that preparations were underway to carry out a survey: “The Trustees have already taken the preliminary steps to place a suitable corps in the field, who, under the directions of the company’s geologist, will rigorously prosecute the survey of our own property.”<sup>99</sup> On occasion, prospectuses took an alternate tactic, declaring that surveys had already happened and that accurate and detailed maps existed, but that the resultant archive was still housed in the company’s offices where it had not yet been made public.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Santa La Saria Mining Company of Colorado, *Santa La Saria Silver Mines of Colorado* (Philadelphia: Thos. S. Dando, 1875), 6-7. Likewise, the 1880 prospectus for the South Horn Silver Mining Company in Utah reported that an “elaborate and careful survey” had been commissioned, and that the report, “illustrated with numerous views, maps, and sections,” would soon appear. *South Horn Silver Mining Co.* (New York, s.n., 1880), 2.

<sup>99</sup> *Reciprocity Mining Company of Canada East, A Statement of the Property, Condition, and Resources of the Reciprocity Mining Co. of Canada East* (New York, 1864), 33.

<sup>100</sup> Ulster Gold and Silver Mining Company, *The Ulster Gold & Silver Mining Company, Ulster County, New York* (New York, 1866), 4.

This rhetoric—a rhetoric of forthcoming arrival of information—also surfaces in period mining maps. Mining maps often identified spaces where topographic and geological knowledge was incomplete and not yet available, but which would soon become known through surveys. For example, James. O. Hollister’s emigrant guide, *The Mines of Colorado* (1867), included a map of mining lands west of Denver. In the map, dashed grid lines identify unmined areas where “proposed surveys” would soon take place (fig. 2.5).<sup>101</sup>

Such rhetoric offered a temporal explanation for a spatial problem. Boosters could acknowledge the inherent uncertainties of lode mining and then explain them away by characterizing uncertainty as a mere problem of delivery: accurate information existed, it just had not arrived yet. Furthermore, by stressing the pending delivery of more comprehensive information, descriptions of soon-to-be-surveyed space also cast the reader as a privileged insider—someone who was receiving a promising tip just before the information became more widely known. In reality, only a significant capital investment could establish the infrastructure necessary to produce the knowledge that would, in turn, determine the profitability of the investment. Yet prospectuses implied that the production of knowledge occurred independently from the circulation of capital.

Ludlow’s description of the Front Range mining industry operates similarly. He offers scattered descriptions of potentially abundant mineral deposits, while acknowledging a lack of more comprehensive information. In doing so, he fragments

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<sup>101</sup> James Ovando Hollister, *The Mines of Colorado* (Springfield, MA: Samuel Bowles & Company, 1867), 2.

space and narrows time in a way that seems calculated to encourage speculative investment.

Indeed, in one instance Ludlow overtly promotes the Front Range as an ideal site for speculation. During a trip from Denver to the gold fields near Pike's Peak, Ludlow's traveling party stopped to rest at Garden of the Gods, a sandstone rock formation near present-day Colorado Springs. While within Garden of the Gods, Ludlow admitted to feeling the "temptation of immediate and perhaps munificent returns offered by speculation and the mines." He then proposed an idea: "vast quantities of hard wood are needed in Denver and the mines . . . it certainly would take but little time & energy to commence the experiment" of growing timber "by planting the nuts, seeds, or acorns" on a nearby plot. "If it succeeded," he surmised, "the proprietor would have the satisfaction of a fine source of revenue yearly, doubling its value before his eyes." Ludlow's descriptions characterize the Rockies as a space where his ability to meaningfully relate part to whole is compromised. Yet this does not deter his dreams of profiting off of the region. It merely encourages him to recalculate his position within this mining economy. He ponders a business role better suited for profit: that of a lumber baron, a supplier for those more willing to take on the risks of mining.<sup>102</sup>

Ludlow's acknowledgement of the precarious economic conditions on the Front Range finds expression in the haphazard dispersal of firsthand descriptions through his text. He enfolds his observations into a narrative structure that acknowledges the epistemological uncertainties inherent to lode mining, but it

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<sup>102</sup> Ludlow, *The Heart of the Continent*, 186-187.



simultaneously translates such uncertainty into a sign that speculative investment might nonetheless still be profitable.<sup>103</sup>

In *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, Bierstadt would offer a similar assessment of the Rockies. But whereas Ludlow relied on a literary narrative sequencing to point to the epistemological challenges facing lode miners, Bierstadt would evoke the fraught experiencing of prospecting through the spatial organization of a single image.

### **Bierstadt at Chicago Lakes**

On June 17, Bierstadt and William Newton Byers (fig. 2.6), the editor of the region's foremost newspaper, *The Rocky Mountain News*, embarked on a four-day sketching trip to Chicago Lakes, a pair of mountain lakes located roughly fifty miles west of Denver, just southeast of Mount Spalding and Mount Evans. The lakes occupied the heart of the Front Range mining industry. To reach them, Bierstadt and Byers took a mining road from Denver to the town of Idaho Springs, an outfitting and shipping hub located at the confluence of Clear Creek and Chicago Creek, the site of

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<sup>103</sup> Ludlow's struggles to relate part to whole stand in contrast to his exalted account of his subsequent tour of Yosemite. Spiritual reverie suffuses Ludlow's descriptions of the California valley: "We did not seem so much to be seeing from that crag of vision and a new earth into which creative spirit had just been breathed," he exclaimed when recounting his first encounter with Inspiration Point. "Never were words so beggared for an abridged translation of any Scripture or Nature." Ibid. 426. In Yosemite, geological features no longer appear as momentary digressions. They transfix Ludlow, inciting extended poetic ruminations on the divine unity of nature. This is not to imply that there is a qualitative contrast to be drawn between Ludlow's responses to Yosemite and Front Range scenery, or to suggest that some aspect of Yosemite itself somehow facilitated an inherently more impactful and meaningful experience of nature, one untarnished by the presence of an industrialized mining economy. Rather, Ludlow's differing response to Yosemite indicates that he did not envision or describe the West as a monolithic entity.

some of the earliest placer gold discoveries in 1858. From Idaho Springs, they hiked roughly ten miles southwest, up Chicago Creek to Lower Chicago Lakes.<sup>104</sup> In bringing Bierstadt to Chicago Lakes, Byers was showing an area that had not only catalyzed Denver's rapid growth as a lode mining community, but remained integral to both Byers' and the city's economic future.

Byers' ties to Front Range mines dated to the 1858-59 Pike's Peak gold rush. He was living in Omaha when the rush hit, working as a deputy surveyor for the federal government and as a partner in a local real estate firm, Poppleton & Byers. As rumors of placer discoveries near Pikes Peak spread, Byers joined the thousands of prospectors that travelled West. But instead of prospecting, he set his sights on the popular press. Within a week of his arrival, Byers published the first issue of *The Rocky Mountain News*.<sup>105</sup> For the next thirty years, he would use his paper to promote Denver and nearby Front Range mines as ideal sites for capital and real estate investments.<sup>106</sup> Simultaneously, he would repeatedly attempt to profit off the local mines through his own speculations. According to his biographer, Byers "was on the scene early in each new [mining] camp" and reportedly owned claims in Clear Creek

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<sup>104</sup> Trenton and Hassrick, *The Rocky Mountains*, 141.

<sup>105</sup> Brosnan, *Uniting Mountain and Plain*, 13.

<sup>106</sup> William Newton Byers, "Farming vs. Gold Digging," *The Rocky Mountain News* (Denver), April 22, 1859, 1, quoted in Alvin T. Steinel, *History of Agriculture in Colorado* (Fort Collins, Col.: The State Agricultural College, 1926), 53. In 1859, the same year he founded *The Rocky Mountain News*, Byers also published an emigrant guide advertising the Colorado gold fields. William N. Byers, *Handbook to the Gold Fields of Nebraska and Kansas* (Chicago D. B. Cooke & Co., 1859).

County, which encompassed both Chicago Lakes and the route to Chicago Lake.<sup>107</sup> By the time he met Bierstadt in 1863, Byers had expanded his role as a mining booster and speculator. In addition to publishing editorials extolling the region's prospects, he made frequent trips to New York to seek out Northeastern capitalists, often to issue securities to fund prospective lode mining corporations.<sup>108</sup>

Byers likely brought Bierstadt to Chicago Lakes in an effort to revive flagging economic interest in Clear Creek County. Byers published several accounts of the trip in *The Rocky Mountain News*. In each, he emphasized the overwhelming aesthetic beauty of a region predominantly known for its mines. According to Byers, Chicago Lakes had entranced Bierstadt at first sight: "the moment he caught the view fatigue and hunger were forgotten. He said nothing, but his face was a picture of intense life and excitement."<sup>109</sup> Bierstadt reportedly produced several oil sketches in a short time; "patience vanished, and in nervous haste, canvas, paints and brushes were unpacked and a couple of hours saw, under his skillful hands, some miles of mountains hills,

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<sup>107</sup> Byers' biographer also described the newspaperman less charitably as "the personification of the eternal sucker for boom-and-bust mining investments." Robert L. Perkin, *The First Hundred Years: An Informal History of Denver and the Rocky Mountain News* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959), 45, 326. For additional biographical material, see Maxine Benson, "William Newton Byers," *The New Encyclopedia of the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 148 and Eugene Parsons, "William Newton Byers," *Mining American (New York)*, March 10, 1917, 8.

<sup>108</sup> Perkin, *The First Hundred Years*, 230. Some of his financial dealings reached as far as England. In 1870, he authorized representatives in London to sell securities for a mining property in Boulder County, Colorado. Spence, *British Investments*, 35.

<sup>109</sup> William Newton Byers, "Bierstadt's Visit to Colorado: Sketching for the Famous Painting, 'Storm in the Rocky Mountains,'" *Magazine of Western History*, 11, no 3. (January 1890): 238.

forests and valley reproduced with all its vivid coloring, and the clouds shadows that were sweeping over it.”<sup>110</sup> This characterization of Bierstadt’s affect is compelling in that it suggests the land demanded a quick, nearly instantaneous response from those who encountered it—a suggestive echo of the narrow timeframe used to court speculative investment. If Byers meant to draw attention to Chicago Lakes, he succeeded, although the attention would ultimately center on tourism rather than mining. Within a decade, the lakes had become a popular sightseeing destination, thanks in large part to Byers’ narration of Bierstadt’s encounter with the site.<sup>111</sup>

In contrast to Byers’ unqualified praise of the beauty of Chicago Lakes, Bierstadt’s paintings of the site offer a more complex and ambivalent response. One of Bierstadt’s sketches from the trip survives: *Mountain Lake* (fig. 2.7). Depicting the view from just below Lower Chicago Lake, looking west-southwest toward Mount Spalding, the picture exhibits a planar geometry assertive in its simplicity. Alternating slopes of mountain topography offer a trio of interlocking diagonals; clear divisions distinguish foreground, middle ground, Mount Spalding, and the distant sky beyond. Marked gradations of color reinforce the planar distinctions. Bright flecks of ultramarine in the foreground scatter across warm yellows, ochre, and greens, yielding

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<sup>110</sup> William Newton Byers, “Chicago Lakes,” *The Rocky Mountain News*, June 17, 1863, 1, quoted in Trenton and Hassrick, *The Rocky Mountains*, 141.

<sup>111</sup> Travel guides and popular periodicals quickly came to associate the lakes with Bierstadt’s monumental picture, a link that Byers was happy to perpetuate. Verplanck Colvin, “The Dome of the Continent,” *Harper’s Weekly*, December 1872, 28; William M. Thayer, *Marvels of the New West: A Vivid Portrayal of the Stupendous Marvels in the Vast Wonderland West of the Missouri River* (Norwich, CT: The Henry Bill Publishing Company, 1887), 130; John Gladwyn Jebb, “The Lost Secret of the Cocos Group,” *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine* 113, no. 687 (January 1973): 98-119.

to the muted pairing of heavy greens and browns on the far side of Lower Chicago Lake. Hints of blue return in the far distance, illuminating the cool tones of the distant sky. The sketch magnifies visual distinctions between planes, narrows the view, exaggerates the scale of the middle ground, and sharpens the crest of Mount Spalding—all spatial adjustments that Bierstadt would later employ in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*. Working in the field, Bierstadt was already anticipating how the view might be organized into a finished picture.

Yet an alternate mode of depiction is simultaneously evident, one that complicates the sketch's compositional logic. In the upper right corner of *Mountain Lake*, a layered impasto makes its appearance (fig. 2.8). The shadowed mountainside is built up from whorls of green and brown paint applied *alla prima*, or using wet-in-wet technique. As Bierstadt worked up this portion of the scene, he made slight color adjustments, first adding in traces of a red-tinted ochre, then an ochre mixed with white. Pulled into ridges by a one-half to one-inch wide brush, the surface facture exhibits its own topography: under angled lighting, the impasto casts minute shadows that contribute additional texture and tonality. The interplay of surface texture and blended hues creates a remarkable verism of color. The effect appears all the more striking when it is compared to a contemporary photograph of the site taken in diffuse afternoon light (fig. 2.9). While the planar organization of the study looks forward in time, anticipating the translation of Chicago Lakes into a large-scale exhibition landscape, the layered impasto points backward to the instance of its creation. Indexing Bierstadt's own activity as a maker of the scene, the impasto signifies the past occurrence of an embodied, firsthand encounter between artist and site.

But as it proclaims the artist's direct encounter with nature, the impasto also contains within it a problematic tension between the materiality of paint and illusionism, a tension that calls the importance of this direct encounter into question. The *alla prima* brushstrokes may capture a sense of local color, but the depicted mountain slope appears curiously flat. The zig-zagging brushwork simultaneously effaces any sense of underlying volume, contour, or depth. Bierstadt's technique extracts the illusion of a mass from beneath the picture plane and deposits it on the surface, leaving the viewer with the material tailings of paint. Isolated, piled atop the picture plane, the impasto suggests paint that has not yet been marshaled into signification—almost as if it were still resting on the painter's palette.

Despite its verism, then, this detail never realizes a semiotics of resemblance. Certainly, the impasto's disruptive materiality stems in part from Bierstadt's pragmatic approach when working *en plein air*, where he often used a single study to quickly record multiple aspects of a site, often from different vantage points.<sup>112</sup> But the way in which the materiality of paint isolates this slope, threatening its integrity as an iconic sign, marks a telling departure from Bierstadt's customary approach to composition, evident in the landscapes that he produced before his 1863 visit to the Front Range.

Certainly, one should be wary of comparing preparatory sketches with finished pictures in this way. Yet I dwell on the peculiarities of *Mountain Lake* because the work introduces a formative tension between part and whole, a tension that disrupts the viewer's ability to imaginatively traverse the scene and to grasp nature as a

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<sup>112</sup> Eleanor Harvey discusses the combinatory aspect of Bierstadt's field sketches in *The Painted Sketch: American Impressions from Nature, 1830-1880* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, 1988), 234.

totality. Significantly, this tension surfaces in Bierstadt's post-1863 landscapes, including *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, the finished landscape that resulted from *Mountain Lake*, and stubbornly refuses to disappear.

### Firsthand Encounters

Bierstadt's early Western landscapes, those made between his first trip west in 1859, and his second in 1863 present a direct encounter with nature as a foundational means of grasping and interpreting western space.<sup>113</sup> These paintings do so through the interaction of figural staffage and compositional space.<sup>114</sup> Take, for example, *View from the Wind River Mountains, Wyoming* (fig. 2.10), which Bierstadt painted soon after returning from his 1859 trip. In the foreground, three mounted American Indians pass through a cluster of exposed rock outcroppings. The gentle downslope guides the eye along their implied route: down the hill, toward the central plain, and eventually to the mountains beyond. What is noteworthy about this path is its comprehensiveness—the entirety of the landscape will be taken in over the course of this imagined journey,

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<sup>113</sup> Bierstadt's first trip West was made in the company of the Lander Survey, a road-finding expedition to the Wind River Mountains. Nancy K. Anderson, "Albert Bierstadt: The Path to California, 1830-1874," (PhD. Diss., University of Delaware, 1985), 106-158; Alan Fraser Houston and Jourdan Moore Houston, "The 1859 Lander Expedition Revisited: 'Worthy Relics' Tell New Tales of a Wind River Wagon Road," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 49, no. 2 (1999): 50-71.

<sup>114</sup> In focusing on this relationship, I draw from Joseph Leo Koerner's definition of figural staffage as a site not only "of identification or mediation between painting and viewer, nature and consciousness," but a space where a sense of distance or estrangement from nature might be thematized as well. Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London, UK: Reaktion Books, 2009), especially 245-268.

ranging from the minute particularities of individual boulders to the full expanse of the Wind River Mountains in the distance. Even the parts of the view that are hidden from view, such as the portion of the horizon cropped behind the leftmost bluffs, are still rendered accessible to imagined traversal. The encounter with these hidden spaces is merely deferred to a future point within the narrative—the tower-like boulder rising above the tree line will soon yield to a full panoramic view of the distant peaks.<sup>115</sup> *View from the Wind River Mountains* thus constructs western space as totality, a totality that can be encountered, observed, and understood through an imagined experience of embodied traversal. Moreover, it is a totality that will soon be made available for the spectator, as the two American Indian riders prepare to vacate the foreground under their own volition.<sup>116</sup>

This construction is also evident in a picture that deploys white figures as staffage, *On the On the Platte River, Nebraska* (fig. 2.11). The picture, which follows three horsemen around the shoreline of the titular river, underscores the relationship between the close visual observation of geological features and the viewer's ability to

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<sup>115</sup> On the meaning of panoramic viewpoints, see Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, c. 1830-1865* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

<sup>116</sup> This emphasis on a narrative of overland travel links Bierstadt and his early landscapes to antebellum artist-explorers such as George Catlin and Seth Eastman, whose pictures worked in different ways to correlate the authority of their makers with their firsthand travels in the West. As Nenette Luarca-Shoaf has emphasized, Catlin's landscape paintings—with their consistently elevated vantage points, serialized format, and evidence of weathering from the field—functioned as material evidence of Catlin's mobility as a "traveler-observer" of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. Luarca-Shoaf, "The Mississippi River in Antebellum Visual Culture" (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 2012), 26-91.



grasp nature as a whole. Loose boulders and exposed outcroppings line the riders' path, creating opportunities to pause and examine individual topographic features. *On the Platte River, Nebraska* presents travel (and picture viewing) as accumulative exercises—sequencings of observations that cohere into a unified narrative. Even as a foreigner or outsider within the landscape—an identity indicated by the riders' packs and travel gear—the landscape is still easily comprehensible through the rhythms of travel.<sup>117</sup>

Furthermore, the composition thematizes a process of relating part to whole, as it creates an opportunity for viewers to relate the scattered boulders to the nearby bluff, and then the bluff to the distant peaks on the horizon—a synthesizing mode of encounter that implies the ease with which the West can be grasped and understood by outsiders. That the picture foregrounds geological observation, a popular pastime of the mid-nineteenth century, as the primary mode of encounter with nature further facilitates the viewer's ease of identification with the scene.<sup>118</sup>

This narrative relationship between staffage and compositional space works in service of an acquisitive gaze. Sometimes in Bierstadt's paintings this gaze verges on the predatory. Another early work, *Elk Grazing in the Wind River Country* (fig. 2.12)

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<sup>117</sup> On the figure of the “outsider,” or “wanderer” within a landscape painting, see Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich*, 253-261. Bierstadt's emphasis on the cumulative experiences of travel also links his early Western landscapes to the European Grand Tour, which Bierstadt participated in while studying in Düsseldorf in the 1850s. For accounts of Bierstadt's European travels, see Anderson & Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt*, 120-122 and Worthington Whittredge, *The Autobiography of Worthington Whittredge, 1820-1910* (Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum Press, 1942), 26-40.

<sup>118</sup> On the significance of geology to nineteenth-century landscape painting, see Rebecca Bailey Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology & American Landscape Painting, 1825-1875* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

utilizes nonhuman staffage to draw the viewer into the depicted scene. An expansive horizontal foreground spans the entirety of the view. Grassy details press close to the picture plane, reaching out toward the space of the viewer. A herd of elk already inhabit the grassland. Facing the mountains, they do not acknowledge or react to the viewer's implied presence. The picture thus affords an opportunity to arrive at and imaginatively enter into the prairie, where one might easily take on the role of sportsman. In *Elk Grazing in the Wind River Country*, the relationship between staffage and compositional space works to suspend time in order to create a fantasy of firsthand contact, one in which the contents of the landscape offer themselves as easy prey.<sup>119</sup>

In contrast to these three landscapes, *Mountain Lake* isolates the pictorial element that signifies a firsthand encounter between artist and subject—the veristic impasto of the mountainside—from the rest of the depicted space. The impasto does not occupy a clearly identifiable stop on an imagined itinerary. The narrative structure that Bierstadt relied on to relate part to whole is thus left unresolved, calling the semiotic capacity of the impasto in question while also marginalizing the pictorial sign that most directly asserts Bierstadt's presence at the scene.

### **The Prospector's Gaze**

Like Bierstadt's early canvases, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* stages an imagined journey through western space. But whereas *Wind River Mountains* and *On*

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<sup>119</sup> An analysis of the cultural politics of shooting and killing in nineteenth-century American Western landscapes appears in Kenneth Haltman, *Looking Close and Seeing Far: Samuel Seymour, Titian Ramsay Peale, and the Art of the Long Expedition, 1818-1823* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 133-152.

*the Platte River, Nebraska* guide the viewer through, across, and eventually out of the depicted scene in an all-encompassing narrative of overland travel, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* stages a series of spatially disconnected encounters.

The composition of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* unfolds around a sunlit mountainside above a central lake. Three streams flow down the slope; two follow eroded channels in the rock, the third fans out across the granite surface (fig. 2.13). They converge in a shoreline that flashes white against the lake's blue-black surface. Rendered in crisp strokes of bright white, the streams illuminate shimmering pathways into the landscape (a fourth is visible above the opposite shore, where it leaps down a cliff before sliding into open air (fig. 2.14)). In this arrangement, Lower Chicago Lake appears as a base camp for the eye, the starting point for several distinct visual journeys.

The streams encourage what might be conceptualized as a prospecting gaze. Much like placer or lode mining prospectors, whose journeys into the mountains typically began with the examination of streambed sediment, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* positions water as the predominant entry point into the mountain scene. Each of the streams invites us to move slowly into the mountains. Angled facets of rock and tumbling water flicker under afternoon light, creating an interplay of reflective surfaces that draws out minute variations in the topography. Additional small details send the eye scanning back and forth across the rocky surface, including a small cluster of bare trees that flank the rightmost stream, their limbs splayed in odd and unexpected angles (fig. 2.15). The central lake seems to hint at a potential reward for such a meticulous examination of the surface. Its shoreline glimmers in a brilliant

sheen of gold-white, as if echoing the sought-after flecks of gold dust glinting on the edge of a prospector's pan (fig. 2.16).<sup>120</sup>

Yet such wealth is not immediately apparent on the surface. The space that the picture offers for traversal is fragmented and disjointed. The three streams occupy different planes in depth, each running roughly parallel to the picture plane. Shifting attention from one to another requires jumping between localized zones of detail. Each jump requires a recalibration of one's sense of scale in relation to the depicted scene, an adjustment that momentarily interrupts and resets the fantasy of embodied access. In contrast, the predominant visual pathway through *On the Platte River, Nebraska Territory* arcs smoothly through space, coordinating fore, middle, and background in a unified perspective that allows one's experience of the picture to unfold within the context of a single journey. In *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, the divergent streambeds cut the mountain into loose ribbons of space, each of which must be followed individually.<sup>121</sup> If the glittering streams evoke a visual experience akin to prospecting, their planar arrangement in space offers a visual analogy to how prospecting entails the partial and piecemeal accumulation of information within a much larger space.

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<sup>120</sup> For a provocative interpretation that links Bierstadt's paintings to prospecting, albeit one that arrives at a different conclusion from this study, see Alexander Nemerov, "Yosemite Valley, Glacier Point Trail," in *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness: American Art from the Yale University Art Gallery*, eds. John Butler and Helen A. Cooper (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, in association with Yale University Press, 2008), 315-317.

<sup>121</sup> For more on this point, see Lee Clark Mitchell, "Bierstadt's Settings, Harte's Plots," in *Reading the West: New Essays on the Literature of the American West*, ed. Michael Kowalewski (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 105-107.

The fragmented composition did not escape notice when the picture was first exhibited in the nineteenth century. I will discuss the art critical reception of Bierstadt's paintings in depth in Chapter Two, but it is worth considering one review, published in *Watson's Weekly Art Journal* in the spring of 1866, when Bierstadt unveiled *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* in New York City. Written by an anonymous art critic, the review identified a series of topographical and geological impossibilities in the picture. The core problem, the critic explained, was that the depicted space was rationally impossible. "Now, let [the viewer] work out a problem in arithmetic," he wrote, pointing to the spatial organization of the middle ground. "The hills . . . are, as we are told, three thousand feet high; right over the hills tower huge masses of cloud which certainly carry the eye up ten to twelve thousand feet higher . . . what is the height of Mount Rosalie? Answer: approximate, ten thousand miles or so. Impossible."<sup>122</sup> Indeed, the upward ascent from the middle ground foothills is impossibly rapid. The sunlit peak presses too close to the picture plane; it threatens to collapse the space tenuously held by the central lake. As a rational, perspectival ordering of space, the picture is a failure. Matthew Baigell has even proposed that Bierstadt included the storm to cover his botched rendering of spatial recession.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> "Bierstadt's 'Storm in the Rocky Mountain,'" *Watson's Weekly Art Journal*, March 3, 1866, 307.

<sup>123</sup> Matthew Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt* (New York: Watson Guptill Publications, 1988), 40.

Yet perhaps the lack of a coherent perspective system is the point. Linear perspective is a system of representation that coordinates space around a viewing subject who stands atop the surface of the earth. It is not equipped to render the subterranean. Notably, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* includes a number of references to underground spaces. The low cloud cover over Lower Chicago Lake, for instance, looks tunnel-like. It creates a cavernous opening that bores like a mineshaft into the space below the sunlit peak of Mount Evans (fig. 2.17). Additionally, scattered boulders rest underwater in the small pool in the lower right, their contours just visible beneath the water's surface (fig. 2.18). The pool offers a threshold between visible and invisible spaces, surface and subterranean, drawing attention toward what might lie submerged out of sight.<sup>124</sup> Similarly, each of the mountain streams trails upward to points where the topography vanishes under impenetrable shadow (fig. 2.19). The disappearance of the rightmost stream is especially jarring. Above the blasted trees, it dissolves into mere flecks of white smeared over an otherwise complete blackness (fig. 2.20). The material surface of the picture itself contributes to the stream's disappearance. The reflective sheen of the varnish obscures much of the depicted topography. Viewing this detail becomes an exercise in attempting to see beneath the surface of the painting.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> For more on Bierstadt's engagement with underwater spaces, see Elizabeth Hutchinson, "'A Narrow Escape:' Albert Bierstadt's *Wreck of the 'Ancon,'*" *American Art* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 50-69.

<sup>125</sup> Admittedly, Bierstadt sometimes installed his paintings with their upper edge tilted slightly toward the viewer, an effect that reduces the glare but does not eliminate it. Lance Mayer and Gay Myers, "Bierstadt and Other 19th-Century American Painters in Context." *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, 38, no. 1 (Spring, 1999): 56.

Whether standing atop the foreground hilltop or scrambling prospector-like up each streambed, the impossibility of imaginatively accessing or seeing beneath the surface remains apparent. Fantasies of underground wealth remain just that—fantasies. The spatial distortions signal that we look upon a landscape whose significance stems from subterranean spaces that cannot be translated easily into representation.

The preponderance of clouds in the painting may be significant in this context as well. In his study of Renaissance painting, Hubert Damisch highlights how clouds often function semiotically to mark what falls outside the bounds of linear perspective. “Perspective,” he explains, “only needs to ‘know’ things that it can reduce to its own order, things that occupy a place, and cannot be measured; and as for clouds, nor can their outlines be fixed or their shapes analyzed in terms of surfaces.”<sup>126</sup> The pictorial signs that signify clouds conjure aspects of existence that are excluded from the realm of the surface-bound and terrestrial and its concomitant representational systems; clouds hint at the presence of alterity and difference.<sup>127</sup> Perhaps Bierstadt’s clouds operate similarly. Cloaking the mountain topography, they evoke the subterranean in both the shape and the inscrutability of their cast shadows. Instantiating moments in which vision fails, they identify and set limits on our ability to discern meaning from an embodied vantage point atop the surface of the earth. They allude to, without

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<sup>126</sup> Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward A History of Painting* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 124. For examples of the application of Damisch’s theories within American art history, see Michael Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 45-86; Robin Kelsey, *Photography and the Art of Chance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 163, 363.

<sup>127</sup> Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage*, 68.

depicting directly, a subterranean landscape that cannot be known from the traditional vantage point of linear perspective.

In addition to the picture's distorted perspective, the arrangement of geological motifs reinforces these problems in viewing and interpretation. After outlining the perspectival faults within the picture, the critic for *Watson's* turned to the arrangement of different types of rocks in the picture, arguing that it was geologically absurd: "The whole science of geology cries out against him [Bierstadt]; he has built up, on the right, overhanging and pinnacled fortresses of rock upon underlying *layers*; farther on, he has broken up a rocky hill into a number of protuberances of nearly equal size, in a manner which the laws of rock-formation and rock disintegration never authorize."<sup>128</sup> Less than a decade after Bierstadt unveiled *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, Thomas Moran would produce his monumental paintings of the Grand Canyon and the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. In these pictures, Moran carefully coordinated topographical details into an illustration of a scientific hypothesis about the role of water and erosion in shaping the terrain.<sup>129</sup> No such didacticism is present in Bierstadt's picture. It is possible, and perhaps correct, to attribute the picture's lack of geological accuracy to Bierstadt's willingness to fabricate fantastical compositional arrangements in service of bombastic visual effects. However, it is worth assessing the picture's lack of geological coherence with Ludlow's remarks on the lack of

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<sup>128</sup> "Bierstadt's 'Storm in the Rocky Mountain,'" 307.

<sup>129</sup> Joni Kinsey, *Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992); Diana Seave Greenwald, "The Big Picture: Thomas Moran's *The Grand Cañon of the Yellowstone* and the Development of the American West," *Winterthur Portfolio* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 175-210.



systematic knowledge of the Front Range environment in mind. With its distorted topography and incoherent geology, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* portrays a space whose value cannot be read through a systematized worldview. In such a reading, Bierstadt's painting may not illustrate geological facts, but it still speaks to the geological realities experienced by miners and those working in service of natural resource extraction.

With this in mind, it is tempting to read the problems in viewing that this picture offers as a warning against overeager investment in the Front Range. Indeed, Bierstadt was certainly aware of the challenges that prospectors faced. During his 1859 trip to the Wind River Mountains, he sketched a group of destitute prospectors returning east along the Platte River and subsequently published the scene in *Harper's Weekly* (fig. 2.21).<sup>130</sup>

However, even as *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* challenges the authority of the viewer who imaginatively embeds themselves within the scene, it does not do away with the acquisitive desires that underpin this subject position. This is due in part to the fact that the picture still adheres to the pictorial conventions of the sublime; the viewing platform and climactic storm offers a space to imagine one's exposure pleurably and safely within a vast, inhospitable wilderness. For all of its visual and narrative drama, conventions of the sublime aestheticize human difference from nature.<sup>131</sup> The sublime recasts the unfamiliar as a spectacle to be visually

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<sup>130</sup> "The Pike's Peak Gold Mines," *Harper's Weekly*, August 13, 1859, 516.

<sup>131</sup> For an analysis of the visual and literary conventions of the sublime, see Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the*

consumed.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, even as the spatio-temporal aspects of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* communicate the limitations of the surface-bound prospecting gaze, the glittering streams and hints of the underground still acknowledge acquisitive fantasies as the motivating impulse behind an encounter with nature.<sup>133</sup> The picture does not do away with such fantasies, it merely complicates their actualization.

The question remains, though, of how these acquisitive fantasies relate to the assorted goods left in the grass. Stepping onto the hilltop scene, the viewer gains access to a selection of discarded objects. Their arrangement thematizes accessibility. The buffalo robe hangs over a shrub, draped so that its patterned decorations face the picture plane, while the multi-colored garment below the saddle is carefully laid flat, as if it were spread out in anticipation of our gaze rather than for use by the hilltop's former occupants. Yet the recentness of the figures' sudden departure complicates any attempt at the focused, localized scrutiny of these goods, especially when combined with the histrionic darkness of the storm. Even though Bierstadt rendered each object in colorful detail, other narrative and compositional elements pull one's attention away

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*Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); David E. Nye, *The American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

<sup>132</sup> Additionally, as Karl Kusserow warns, such conventions “reify the notion . . . that humans and nature are not part of the same world.” “The Trouble with Empire,” in *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment*, eds. Karl Kusserow and Alan Braddock (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 128.

<sup>133</sup> For an insightful analysis of the rare capacity of the medium of landscape painting to resist the acquisitive subject that is characteristic to landscape, see Jennifer Raab, *Frederic Church: The Art and Science of Detail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 87-122.

from the small hilltop. How then, does one understand the pressures that this painting imposes on this vantage point?<sup>134</sup>

Importantly, the tension between the broader landscape and the collections of scattered goods marks a radical shift in approach from Bierstadt's first major Western picture, *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (fig. 2.22). In *Lander's Peak*, a sprawling hunting camp occupies the foreground. More than thirty figures and nearly as many animals carry out daily activities in the presence of a wealth of material goods—several of which, such as the saddles resting on the ground next to a pile of robes and assorted objects recall those abandoned in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* (fig. 2.23). Just above the foreground, twin arms of forested terrain reach out from a central waterfall, enclosing the prairie in a sweeping embrace. Whereas the slopes of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* draw the eye into depth with glistening, jagged streambeds, the mountains in *Lander's Peak* gently rebuff the viewer's penetrative gaze. Pasty brushwork obscures topographical details: ochre and burgundy highlights float over the mountain topography instead of nestling into and articulating the contours of the terrain, all of which appears through a hazy afternoon *sfumato* (fig.

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<sup>134</sup> It is certainly possible that Bierstadt intended for the abandoned camp to reference recent Front Range land dispossession efforts, which were backed in no small part by William Byers and *The Rocky Mountain News*. On Byers' racism, see Brosnan, *Uniting Mountain and Plain*, 39-64; Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 215-217. However, any interpretation that seeks to recuperate Bierstadt's reputation in this way should note Bierstadt's impassivity in the face of land dispossession efforts. Alan Braddock has asserted, rightly in my esteem, that Bierstadt's paintings offer no more than "tragic operative resignation" in response to real conditions of displacement. They never address, or even acknowledge, the underlying economic and political factors that drove dispossession. Braddock, "Poaching Pictures: Yellowstone, Buffalo, and the Art of Wildlife Conservation," *American Art* 23, no. 3 (Fall, 2009): 54.

2.24). Despite their grandeur, the mountain slopes nudge attention back toward the meticulously detailed and brightly colored animals, objects, and people that occupy the foreground. In *Lander's Peak*, the mountains function as a backdrop, the setting for a stage-like space populated by American Indian figures.

Thus, there is a sharp contrast between the foreground treatments of *Lander's Peak* and *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*. Whereas the former picture pushes American Indian goods and figures close to the picture plane so as to facilitate their close examination, the latter work marginalizes such staffage, relegating it to a corner of the scene while subjecting it to a narrative marked by ambiguity and threat. On one level, this contrast reinforces a changing conception of the value of Western land, with the running figures in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* signaling the uncertain utility of the grounded, embodied viewpoint as a means of perceiving the value of nature.

But there is a second, complementary way of approaching this contrast, one that points to a shift in how Bierstadt conceived of the value of American Indians—both living and painted—as commodities for visual consumption. As Bierstadt was grappling with the uncertain value of mining land along the Front Range, he was also grappling with the value of his landscape paintings as commodities. As the following section demonstrates, Bierstadt's desire to maximize the profitability of his artmaking led him to fundamentally change the role of American Indians in his painting practice. To explore this change, and to articulate how it is registered in the contrasting foregrounds of *Lander's Peak* and *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, a further unpacking of Bierstadt's relationship with American Indians is necessary.

### ***Lander's Peak at the Metropolitan Sanitary Fair***

Notably, Bierstadt had originally paired the stage-like foreground of *Lander's Peak* with a literal stage, which he populated with real indigenous objects and a group of hired American Indian performers. This pairing took place at the 1864 Metropolitan Sanitary Fair, where, in the Fine Art Gallery, *Lander's Peak* hung prominently on the west wall. Across the fairgrounds, Bierstadt had also organized the “Indian Department,” a large, purpose-built tent filled with indigenous objects and a central stage. Atop the stage, a group of hired American Indians performed dances several times a day for fairgoers (fig. 2.25).

The Indian Department was the first—and only—time in Bierstadt’s career that Bierstadt worked directly with American Indians as performers. Bierstadt had previous experience photographing and sketching Shoshone during his trip West on the Lander Expedition of 1859 (fig. 2.26). And during his first and second trips, he compiled a significant personal collection of American Indian artifacts from various tribes on the Great Plains and in the Pacific Northwest—all of which was destroyed in a fire at Bierstadt’s estate in 1882.<sup>135</sup> But prior to the fair, he had not leveraged connections between his painting practice, his collecting habits, and living American Indian subjects. Perhaps by bringing together living and painted bodies at the Sanitary Fair Bierstadt hoped to align his practice with an itinerant economy of performance: the “Indian galleries” developed by a prior generation of antebellum artists such as George Catlin, Seth Eastman, and John Mix Stanley.<sup>136</sup> Regardless of his exact

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<sup>135</sup> “Bierstadt’s Loss by Fire,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 1882, 5.

<sup>136</sup> Emily C. Burns, “The Itinerant John Mix Stanley and the Circulating Spectacle of the West in Mid-Century America,” in *Painted Journeys: The Art of John Mix Stanley*, eds. Peter H. Hassrick and Mindy N. Besaw (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press,

motivations, which remain unclear, the relevant question in this instance is why Bierstadt chose not to repeat the experiment.

Lamentably, the names and tribal affiliations of the members of the Indian Department are lost, although certain clues survive in the archive. Some press outlets claimed that the troupe consisted entirely of members of the Iroquois Six Nations from the northeast. Others stated that the performers were a mixture of Blackfeet and Shoshone people brought east from the Plains.<sup>137</sup> A version of the fair map published in *The New York Herald* identified the performers as Shoshone (fig. 2.27). However, the same paper reported that the group consisted of members of New York tribes affiliated with the Iroquois Six Nations, including one Cayuga and several Onondagas from near Syracuse, as well as several Shoshone who had accompanied Bierstadt during his first trip West, raising the possibility that Bierstadt and fair organizers worked with a mixture of western and eastern tribes, or, more likely, that they hired members of the Iroquois Six Nations to perform as Plains Indians.<sup>138</sup>

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2015), 3-32. The literature on Catlin's Indian Gallery is extensive, but for useful introductions to the topic see Brian W. Dippie, *George Catlin and His Indian Gallery* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002); William H. Truettner, *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979).

<sup>137</sup> Even after describing the tribal makeup of the group, *Herald* still referred to the performers as "Bierstadt's Rocky Mountain Indians Shoshone Tribe," *The New York Herald*, April 4, 1864, 1.

<sup>138</sup> "Sanitary Fair," *The New-York Tribune*, April 5, 1864, 1. On Bierstadt's encounters with Shoshone on his 1859 trip West, see Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock, "Stereoscopic Photography and the Western Paintings of Albert Bierstadt," *Art Quarterly* 33 (Winter 1970): 360-78. After the New York fair, Bierstadt referred organizers of the Philadelphia Sanitary Fair to Chief Peter, a member of the Council of the Six Nations, for assistance hiring Native performers for a separate Indian display. Elizabeth Milroy, "Avenue of Dreams: Patriotism and the Spectator at Philadelphia's

A single photograph of the Sanitary Fair performers survives (fig. 2.28). The blurry image, taken by the New York photographer Jeremiah Gurney, shows a mixture of standing and seated individuals gathered atop a wooden stage and facing the space of the audience. Two tent structures flank the performers, who wear indigenous dress and hold various accoutrements, including a drum, several staffs, as well as an infant. Hints of the larger performance hall are evident on the margins of the scene, such as an elk antler that projects upward toward a hanging gas-lighting track and a grid of wood slats supporting a skylight. A densely packed display case is visible between the audience seating and the stage. Behind the performers hangs a painted landscape backdrop. Within the backdrop, a sequence of waterfalls cascades down from the mountains onto a central plane. It is unclear whether Bierstadt painted the scene himself, but the resemblance to the middle ground of *Lander's Peak* is unmistakable. With this backdrop, the stage becomes a pendant to the populated foreground of Bierstadt's nearby painting.

Bierstadt worked to make the connection between painting and performance explicit. Several days before the fair opened to the public, the American Indian performers danced in front of *Lander's Peak* as part of a private reception held in the Gallery.<sup>139</sup> It is unclear whether the dancers mimicked specific details within Bierstadt's picture during their special performance in the Fine Art Gallery, or exactly

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Great Central Sanitary Fair," in *Making and Remaking Pennsylvania's Civil War*, eds. William Blair and William Pencak (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 271, n. 61.

<sup>139</sup> S. F. & E. S., *A Record of the Metropolitan Fair in Aid of the United States Sanitary Commission, Held at New York, in April, 1864. With Photographs* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1867), 37.

how close they stood to Bierstadt's painting. However, the proximity between real and painted bodies during the reception—both of which were brought in by Bierstadt—offers a suggestive parallel to the *tableaux vivants*, or “living picture” performance. As such, it invites consideration within the context of the labor of performance.

As Jessica Horton has emphasized, *tableaux vivants* create a complex intersection of agency and personhood through their commingling of lived and painted bodies. Writing on George Catlin's use of American Indian *tableau vivants* in the 1830s, Horton highlights the importance of attending to the labor involved in staging such displays. This labor often produces a surplus of agency, particularly at the level of the performance itself. “*Tableaux vivants*,” she explains, “reversed the ambitions of nineteenth-century ethnography: instead of turning living Natives into static pictures, they made way for the reanimation of paintings.”<sup>140</sup> By enacting this reanimation, the performers carve out a space in which they may influence the terms of their self-presentation. The circumstances of this reanimation are a reminder of the “sociability” that persists in the archive of ethnographic representations, a sociability that Horton emphasizes is not always reducible to the ideologies that operate in service of colonial expropriation and domination.<sup>141</sup> Sometimes, this reanimation can also open space for an alternate network of intersubjective relationships between colonizer and colonized.

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<sup>140</sup> Jessica Horton, *Art for an Undivided Earth: The American Indian Movement Generation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 155.

<sup>141</sup> Here, I also draw from W. J. T. Mitchell's diagnosis of the landscape medium as the “dreamwork of imperialism.” When Mitchell advances this claim, he emphasizes the way in which the medium also has the capacity to disclose “fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance.” Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape,” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. idem. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 10.



In the case of Bierstadt's Indian Department, contemporaneous accounts of the performances themselves are lacking, making a reconstruction of the tableaux vivants themselves impossible. Gurney's photograph is the only known photograph of the performers, and wood engraved illustrations in popular periodicals offer minimal detail on the stage itself, focusing instead on the space of the tent and the arrangement of the crowd within it. Due to these factors, analyzing visual or textual representations of the performances themselves for traces of "reanimation" is difficult. However, by looking behind the scenes—to records of Bierstadt's off-stage interactions with the hired performers—telling factors are present. Off stage, the performers asserted their agency in ways that exposed the labor involved in the production and maintenance of their identity as ethnographic subjects.

As a pair, *Lander's Peak* and the Indian Department worked in service of a triumphalist narrative of national and international expansion.<sup>142</sup> Held at the Twenty Second Regiment Armory Building in Manhattan, the Sanitary Fair's ostensible purpose was fundraising; proceeds from admission tickets helped pay for the medical care of Union soldiers. More broadly, the fair functioned to incite wartime patriotism. Consisting of a central commercial space surrounded by individual exhibition halls dedicated to agriculture, boat building, cuisine, fine art, manufacturing, weaponry, as well as Bierstadt's Indian Department, the fair offered "skillful fusion of commerce, consumption, patriotism, and theatricality" that reassured guests of the cultural and industrial supremacy of the Northern cause.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Milroy, "Avenue of Dreams," 23-57.

<sup>143</sup> Lorraine Madway, *Purveying Patriotic Pageantry: The Civil War Sanitary Fairs in New York*, *New York History*, 93, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 268. For a useful introduction to

The paintings on display in the Fine Art Gallery reinforced this nationalistic fervor. Bierstadt's *Lander's Peak* hung prominently on the west wall, directly across from Frederic Church's *Heart of the Andes* (fig. 2.29). The juxtaposition of Bierstadt's western and Church's Andean scene spoke to America's intercontinental territorial ambitions, while the nearby presence of Emmanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (fig. 2.30), offered a justificatory bridge linking the nation's origins to its imperial aspirations.<sup>144</sup> *Harper's Weekly* acknowledged the display's expansionist themes, noting that *Lander's Peak* portrayed "the possible seat of supreme civilization."<sup>145</sup>

Bierstadt himself contributed to this sentiment. Writing of the Shoshone encampment in the foreground of *Lander's Peak*, he explained that it served as documentation of "their customs and habits," so they might be "preserved when, perhaps, the scene which it depicts, will no longer echo to the ring of their war-cry, or mark their stealthy step following in its chase."<sup>146</sup> The aural connotations of this remark are noteworthy in comparison to the lingering echo of the thunderclap that

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the topic of Sanitary Fairs, see Melinda Lawson, *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

<sup>144</sup> On the Fine Art Gallery at the Sanitary Fair, see Kevin J. Avery, "'The Heart of the Andes' Exhibited: Frederic E. Church's Window on the Equatorial World," *American Art Journal* 18, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 52-72.

<sup>145</sup> "The New Pictures," *Harper's Weekly*, March 26, 1864, 194.

<sup>146</sup> Albert Bierstadt, "A. Bierstadt's Great Picture, *The Rocky Mountains*, Engraved by James Smillie," (New York: E. Bierstadt, 1863), 4, quoted in *American Art to 1900: A Documentary History*, eds. Sarah Burns and John Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 504.

seems to resonate throughout *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*. In contrast to this latter picture, Bierstadt encourages the viewer to allow *Lander's Peak* to fall into total silence, an aural rhetoric that mutes the social life depicted. After expressing this lament, Bierstadt praised land dispossession. "Upon that very plain where now an Indian village stands," he proclaimed, "a city, populated by our descendants, may rise, and in its art-galleries this picture may eventually find a resting-place."<sup>147</sup> The contradictory sentiments expressed in this statement—an assertion of imperial power combined with a lament for what was lost during the exertion of that power, is characteristic of Bierstadt's few published statements about the future of American Indians.<sup>148</sup>

Bierstadt's Indian Department functioned similarly. Located in a large building at the south end of the fairgrounds, the Department offered a commodified spectacle that reified a sense of irreconcilable cultural difference between white and nonwhite peoples.<sup>149</sup> The New York *Daily Mercury* characterized the backdrop, props, and stage as an authentic documentation of the "curious properties of the red man" and

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 504.

<sup>148</sup> This lament of a loss of a nonwhite past, coupled with praise for a pending white future marks a doubled temporality that historian Renato Rosaldo defines as "imperialist nostalgia." Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," *Representations* 26 (Spring, 1989): 107.

<sup>149</sup> This in contrast to assimilationist forms of representation, which, in the words of Emily Burns, worked to "stabilize exoticism and difference through the use of quotidian representations that emphasized similarities and accessibility, rather than difference." Burns, "The Itinerant John Mix Stanley," 22. For more on "quotidian" representations of the West, see Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1991), 60-99.

“representatively savage; at all events, bearing no traces of civilization.”<sup>150</sup> The paper went on to describe the accompanying performances as “more than corybantic in execution—muscular savagery fairly distancing muscular Christianity in their common fold.”<sup>151</sup> Likewise, the fair’s official report characterized the performers as markers of irreconcilable otherness. It referred to the dances as the products of “bloodthirsty savages” who enacted their “savage rites” for the titillation of a predominantly white audience.<sup>152</sup> With their emphasis on cultural difference, the performances at Bierstadt’s Indian Department “reassured spectators that the triumph of white settlement was achieved over opponents whose ferocity and artistry made them worthy objects of conquest”—an appropriate theme for a Fair calculated to assert the North’s wartime prowess.<sup>153</sup>

By underscoring the apparent otherness of the performers, the Indian Department also allowed viewers to assert their own cultural superiority within the context of a range of white-nonwhite relationships. On occasion, the narrator that accompanied each performance characterized the performers not as Plains Indians but as certain lower-class ethnic groups in New York City. According to the fair’s official report, “The red men were from the Rocky Mountains, or from the wilds of

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<sup>150</sup> “The Metropolitan Fair,” *The Daily Mercury* (New York) April 7, 1864, 3. On the tendency of white audiences to not distinguish between tribes during such performances, see Burns, “The Itinerant John Mix Stanley,” 12.

<sup>151</sup> “The Metropolitan Fair,” *The Daily Mercury*, 3.

<sup>152</sup> J. S. F. & E. S., *A Record of the Metropolitan Fair*, 50.

<sup>153</sup> Madway, “Purveying Patriotic Pageantry,” 284. For a broad analysis of the cultural role of American Indian performances in American history, see Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

Mackerelville, according to the spirit of the narrator.”<sup>154</sup> The use of the term “Mackerelville,” which referred to an impoverished, largely immigrant portion of the East Village, indicates that the Indian Department was used to speak to broader urban anxieties about race and class.<sup>155</sup> Thus, the performances were less about historical authenticity and more about creating a fictive space in which fairgoers could test and maintain a sense of cultural distance between themselves and others in the city. Bierstadt’s use of American Indians at the fair, whether living or painted, thus reinforced a mythologized narrative of Anglo-American imperial might, but also an ongoing process of cultural and racial self-differentiation, one that spoke as much to anxieties about the changing demographics of Northeastern cities as it did the politics of land dispossession in the American West.<sup>156</sup>

However, traces of the lived realities of those who performed for the Indian Department reveal a more complex and multidimensional network of cross-cultural relationships than what this nationalistic rhetoric captures. Specifically, these traces reveal how Bierstadt was forced to contend with the performers not as passive ethnographic subjects, but as contract workers—as individuals whose agency within

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<sup>154</sup> According to the fair’s official report, S. F. & E. S., *A Record of the Metropolitan Fair*, 49.

<sup>155</sup> Madway, “Purveying Patriotic Pageantry,” 218, n. 37.

<sup>156</sup> In advancing these points, I draw from James Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 145-161.

the context of the labor economy allowed them to shape—to a degree—the terms of their public self-presentation.<sup>157</sup>

The Native performers arrived in New York a week before the fair opened. They took advantage of their leisure time by encountering the city as tourists. During this experience, their commercial identity as ethnographic subjects began to slip. According to the fair's official report, "this week was anything but a resting time to the manager of this dusky force, who, it is said, was kept continually upon the *trail*—through the waste places of city grog-shops."<sup>158</sup> Class prejudices inflect this brief statement: "grog-shop," like "Mackerelville," connotes lower-class zones within Manhattan. But beyond its classist vocabulary, the report's description points to how fair organizers struggled to exert control over the Native performers and the conditions of their public presentation.

After describing the performers' taste for "grog shops," the report noted their supervisor's exhaustion as he followed the group through the city. The report stated that he "was so worn down, by a series of pursuits and captures, that he found his after-toils but play in comparison."<sup>159</sup> The frontier language evident in this brief

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<sup>157</sup> I use the term "performer" throughout, rather than "worker," in order to emphasize that the performances themselves—although inadequately preserved in the archive—may have contained similar assertions of agency. In this sense, I draw from Emily C. Burns, who highlights how the logistical components of nineteenth-century Wild West Shows, including travel, contract negotiations, and advertising, offered opportunities for self-definition and self-assertion for Native subjects. Burns, *Transnational Frontiers: The American West in France* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 57-85.

<sup>158</sup> S. F. & E. S., *A Record of the Metropolitan Fair*, 201.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

description—“worn down,” “pursuits and captures,” “continually upon the *trail*”—presents urban Manhattan as the stage for a comic-drama. The supervisor of these excursions—presumably Bierstadt, although the report does not identify him by name—sets out after the Native performers, seeking to arrest them in their attempts to act as tourists. In this context, the frontier language signifies the perceived otherness of the Native performers within the city. It asserts an irreducible difference in the manner of their experience, their inherent status as lingering traces of a non-urban past. But at the same time, the description reveals the instability underlying this constructed identity.<sup>160</sup> Off the clock, the Native performers reveal the labor involved in the construction and preservation of their identity as defeated ethnographic subjects. The artist does not impassively record American Indian behaviors in paint; he has to actively work to control and circumscribe a particular identity formation.

Once the fair began, the performers assumed their prescribed role, dancing three times per day in front of a packed audience. However, despite the evident popularity of the Department, there was “plenty of annoyance behind that painted scene.”<sup>161</sup> The annoyance stemmed in large part from logistical missteps related to ticketing. Prior to the fair, a decision had been made to charge admission to the performances. This fee was in addition to the cost of general admission to the fair. However, organizers neglected to determine whether those holding special fair

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<sup>160</sup> On the slippage between the identities of lived and fictive Indians, as well as the role of humor when such slippages are perceived by white audiences, see Philip Joseph Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 1-14.

<sup>161</sup> S. F. & E. S., *A Record of the Metropolitan Fair*, 50.

“season tickets” would be exempt from the extra charge to enter the Indian Department. When confronted with this oversight, organizers elected to allow season ticket holders to view the performances for free. Consequently, most of the available seats were taken up by nonpaying customers, dramatically reducing the number of tickets available for purchase. As a result, Bierstadt confronted a show that would struggle to recoup expenses, much less contribute meaningfully to the fair’s philanthropic aims.<sup>162</sup>

In the hopes of making the event profitable, one of the fair managers—probably Bierstadt, although it is not known for sure—asked the performers to extend their working hours and the length of their stay. Originally, they had been contracted to perform three times a day for two weeks. They would work unpaid, but the fair would cover the costs of meals and lodging, as well as transportation to and from New York City.<sup>163</sup> In the proposed new arrangement, the performers would stay on for a third week, this time with pay. But they would perform seven times per day instead of three.<sup>164</sup> The performers were reluctant to accept the new terms. (The report stated that they wanted to return home for the spring planting season). They eventually agreed; however, they left the fair three days into the extended run, frustrated with the increased workload.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 50-53.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 201-203.

<sup>165</sup> The report summarized the organizers’ feelings about the their departure thusly: “Then it was that people remembered that the Indian had ever been perfidious, a breaker of contracts both by nature and by teaching; it was only wonderful that he had been trusted so long.” Ibid., 52. However, the writers of the report noted that hindsight



By fair's end, the Indian Department had managed to turn a small but disappointing profit. After factoring in the performers' expenses and construction costs, the Indian Department brought in \$1,765.<sup>166</sup> The Department garnered only three times the profit of a nearby lemonade stand, and significantly less than the \$23,000 that a nearby hardware and home-furnishing display had raised through sales of consumer goods.<sup>167</sup> Reflecting on the comparatively low return, the fair's report concluded that "The Indian department was in many respects one of those experiments whose use is to show to future adventurers in the same path what to avoid."<sup>168</sup> Bierstadt evidently heeded the report's advice. The New York Sanitary Fair was the last time he partnered with American Indians as performers.

Indeed, the discrepancy in profit between the Indian Department and sales of his landscape paintings is striking. In October of 1865, a year and a half after the fair, Bierstadt sold *Lander's Peak* for the then-record sum of \$25,000—more than fourteen times the total proceeds from the Indian Department.<sup>169</sup> Soon after, he completed A

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had clarified the dispute. They stated that the decision to leave was not due to the Natives' disregard for contract labor; rather, it was the result of miscommunication and overwork. "The Indians had been acting generously and in good faith, and they incurred the odium of breaking their engagement when in reality they went away feeling that they were a defrauded and injured people, and that their engagement was broken not by them, but by others to whom they looked up for better things." Ibid., 203-204.

<sup>166</sup> John H. Gourlie, *Final Report of the Treasurer and Finance Committee of the Metropolitan Fair in Aid of the United States Sanitary Commission* (New York: John F. Trow, 1864), 9.

<sup>167</sup> S. F. & E. S., *A Record of the Metropolitan Fair*, 52-53.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>169</sup> Anderson & Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt*, 26.

*Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, which sold for \$20,000. By one estimate, Bierstadt netted more than \$120,000 in sales of his landscapes between 1862 and 1865.<sup>170</sup> The profit disparity seems all the greater when comparing the labor involved. Whereas Bierstadt evidently spent much of the Sanitary Fair managing the logistics of his building, selling *Lander's Peak* and *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* involved a lavish process of high society networking among eager patrons in the elite social clubs of New York and London (a social space discussed in Chapter Two).<sup>171</sup>

This disparity between an economy of performance and an economy of painting might then offer a context for understanding the abandoned foreground of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*. Perhaps the unsteady foreground space functions as an act of erasure, an effort to do away with a link between the painting and an economy of performance. The foreground gives way in a vertiginous plunge, leaving a narrow hilltop exposed to the uncertain prospect of a growing storm, while the running figures leave the brightly colored objects laying within an atmosphere of unease and uncertainty. Like *Lander's Peak*, *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* includes an American Indian encampment; however, it is confined to a shadowed, difficult-to-see passage of middle ground space, where the actions of its inhabitants are indiscernible. The composition of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* thus strips out the features that had facilitated a connection between the economies of painting and performance. The contrast between *Lander's Peak* and *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* suggests that

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>171</sup> Gerald Carr, "Albert Bierstadt, Big Trees, and the British: A Log of Many Anglo-American Ties," *Arts Magazine* 60 (Summer 1986): 60-63.

Bierstadt opened—and then quickly closed—a social space that afforded a more complex intersection of artistic praxis and American Indian agency. Ultimately, it appears that a crude economic rationalism on the part of the artist was the motivating factor in this shift.

### *The Last of the Buffalo*

If *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* reflects Bierstadt's decision to close this type of social space, he reengaged it late in his career, albeit in unintended fashion. This time, it was Lakota Sioux performers that would engage with his art. In 1889, Bierstadt submitted his last large-scale exhibition picture, *The Last of the Buffalo* (fig. 2.31) to the American pavilion at the Exposition Universelle. Infamously, the selection committee rejected the picture. Rebuffed, but undeterred, Bierstadt submitted the picture instead to the Paris Salon, where it went on view before appearing at the French art gallery Boussod and Valladon. Notably, these exhibitions coincided not just with the Exposition Universelle, but also with a run of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show in Paris. In the twilight of his career, Bierstadt once again brought economies of painting and performance into proximity.

The exhibition of *The Last of the Buffalo* at the Paris Salon has been described by Sarah Cash as Bierstadt's lamented "last stand," with its subject matter of bison extinction resonating in relation to changes in aesthetic taste that led to Bierstadt's isolation among his peers.<sup>172</sup> Alternately, Grant Hamming has noted how the painting

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<sup>172</sup> Sarah Cash, *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (New York: Hudson Hills Press, in association with the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2011), 170-174.

and advertising posters for Buffalo Bill's Wild West show tap into a shared visual vocabulary of nostalgia.<sup>173</sup> With Bierstadt's disavowal of his 1864 Indian Department in mind, a synthesis of Cash and Hamming's readings is possible. Perhaps *The Last of the Buffalo* resonates as the artist's attempt, while fading from national artistic relevance, to realign himself with an economy of performance that he had rejected three decades prior and which had now exploded in popularity.

With this reading in mind, Emily Burn's recent discussion of the exhibition of *The Last of the Buffalo* at Boussod and Valladon merits attention. Considering Buffalo Bill's Parisian tour, Burns highlights Íjnyaŋ Mathó (Standing Bear), a Lakota Sioux performer from Buffalo Bill's troupe in Paris. According to period press accounts, Íjnyaŋ Mathó reportedly made regular visits to view *The Last of the Buffalo*. The *New York Times* reported that Íjnyaŋ Mathó expressed admiration for the picture as a depiction of the "glorious past of the redskin and to the buffalo, when the Indian was master of all he could survey."<sup>174</sup> Burns questions the veracity of the story, but notes the way in which press accounts of Íjnyaŋ Mathó's appearances in front of *The Last of the Buffalo* intersected with his own efforts to use raise awareness abroad of the

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<sup>173</sup> Hamming notes, for instance, that *The Last of the Buffalo* resembles in its composition advertisements for Buffalo Bill's show. Hamming, "Amerikanischer Malkasten; American Art and Düsseldorf" (PhD. Diss.: Stanford University, 2016), 196-203. While Hamming positions Bierstadt as a forerunner of Buffalo Bill, Emily Burns proposes a reversal of influences, noting that Bierstadt had created studies for the picture at Buffalo Bill's Wild West show when it was on in New York. Burns, *Transnational Frontiers*, 64.

<sup>174</sup> L. K., "French Talk of the Time: Election Incidents and the Visit of Gladstone, Woman Ambitious to Be Statesmen—Edison's Many Honors—Bierstadt and Rocky Bear," *The New York Times*, October 1, 1889, 9, quoted in Burns, *Transnational Frontiers*, 64.

consequences of the Sioux Commission, an 1889 land dispossession project enacted against the Great Sioux Reservation by the U.S. government.<sup>175</sup> Pulled into Íjyaŋ Mathó's orbit, *The Last of the Buffalo* "registered at once the faraway memory of a once plentiful landscape, more recent memories of 'native soil' by contemporary Lakotas now abroad, and the anxiety of the confiscation of that landscape."<sup>176</sup> *The Last of the Buffalo* therefore inadvertently played a role in Lakota efforts to "use the foreign stage of Paris as a new landscape from which to view Lakota lands."<sup>177</sup> Thus, by returning to a compositional format in which American Indian figures serve as the main protagonists of the scene, seemingly in an effort to capitalize off of the popular appeal of Buffalo Bill's Wild West, Bierstadt unwittingly reopened a space for a "reanimation" of his paintings that he had closed in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*.

### Conclusion

Working with American Indian performers at the 1864 Metropolitan Sanitary Fair—a project that evolved from and bore reference to his 1859 travels with Shoshone near the Wind River Mountains—Bierstadt found dissatisfaction with the uncertain economic prospects of ethnographic displays. Shortly after, he abandoned such ventures and fully embraced the then more reliably profitable venture of landscape painting. Likewise, travelling through the mining districts of the Front

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<sup>175</sup> Burns acknowledges the challenges of discerning Íjyaŋ Mathó's exact views, "due to the tendency to both witting and unwitting mistranslation and fabrication in the press." Burns, *Transnational Frontiers*, 59.

<sup>176</sup> Burns, *Transnational Frontiers*, 64.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

Range in 1863, Bierstadt and Ludlow developed an awareness of the epistemological uncertainties of lode mining—uncertainties that stemmed from the impossibility of discerning the monetary value of subterranean spaces from atop the surface of the earth. They then both produced works that acknowledged these uncertainties, but in ways that still hinted at the promise of speculative investment. Both experiences informed the production of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, a picture that questions, or at least destabilizes, the customary interpretive authority of embodied, direct encounters with western space or its inhabitants (or those hired to perform as its inhabitants).

This debilitation sheds new light on Bierstadt's changing approach to landscape depiction in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*. Nineteenth-century American Western landscape painting is premised on an absence. The genre depopulates Western space, making it available for the arrival of Anglo-American spectators whose imaginative presence symbolizes a larger project of national expansion. The significance of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* in relation to this project lies in the pause that it provokes, the uncertain hesitation that the viewer faces upon stepping onto the exposed hillside. The picture asks whether this is truly the best vantage from which to contemplate the trace signs of subterranean riches that populate the vacated scene.

Notably, even as *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* calls into question the viability of this embedded subject position, it does not proffer an alternative viewpoint. It does, however, hint at one through its massive size. Placed in the lower right, the foreground hilltop occupies a fairly conventional position relative to the rest of the composition. But because the painting is nearly twelve feet wide, viewing the

hilltop requires stepping to the right margin of the canvas and looking down, almost squatting. From this position, it becomes difficult to view the rest of the scene. To take in the composition as a whole, to see the mountains in their entirety rather than as a cluster of compositionally and topographically disjointed elements, one has to literally step back from the campsite. Put another way, to take in the scene on the whole, the viewer has to embark on a literal traversal of the gallery space. And when the viewer steps back from the picture, the campsite shrinks to near inscrutability. The streams glitter enticingly, but the worrisome instances of their disappearance are less glaringly apparent. The landscape still appears unstable, riven as it is by a storm, but it appears less directly threatening to the authority of the viewer's subject position. Viewing from a distance becomes a stabilizing force, one that reasserts the promise and appeal of the contents of the depicted scene.

As the next chapter will argue, it is when the viewer steps back from Bierstadt's paintings that their relationship to the financial forces driving Anglo-American imperial expansion becomes fully apparent. The West, his subsequent paintings proclaim, is most meaningful, most valuable, when contemplated from afar, from a vast continental and transatlantic distance—from the perspective of the faraway land speculator.

### Chapter 3

#### ***AMONG THE SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA AND THE PROMOSE OF LONG-DISTANCE COMMUNICATION***

In the summer of 1868, Albert Bierstadt displayed three landscape paintings at the Langham Hotel in London, England. During the exhibition, an English critic for the *London Art Journal* objected to the choice of venue. “In the large rooms of the Langham Hotel,” he complained, “it is not practicable to obtain . . . the requisite distance from which to view these notable works of Art.” The problem was especially pronounced with the largest painting on display, the twelve-foot-wide *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (fig. 3.1). The critic estimated that it was necessary to step back “some thirty feet” to take in the picture.<sup>178</sup> Yet this this was not feasible. The room was simply too small.<sup>179</sup>

This was not the first time that a landscape by Bierstadt seemed to require a viewing distance that tested the limits of the gallery space. In 1858, a critic for the *Albion* advised the viewer to “step back as far as the breadth of the room permits” to take in *Lake Lucerne* (fig. 3.2).<sup>180</sup> Likewise, in 1867 Bierstadt held a special exhibition of his recently completed landscape, *The Domes of the Yosemite* (fig. 3.3), at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. There, “in

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<sup>178</sup> “Great Pictures by an American Artist,” *The Art Journal* 80 (August 1, 1868): 159-160. The other two paintings on display were *Mount Vesuvius at Midnight* (ca. 1868), now lost, and *Sunset in the Yosemite Valley* (ca. 1868), now in the collection of the Haggin Museum in Stockton, California.

<sup>179</sup> Unfortunately, no photographs or illustrations of Bierstadt’s Langham Hotel exhibition survive.

<sup>180</sup> “National Academy of Design,” *The Albion* 35 (April 24, 1858): 201.



order . . . to see the painting to proper advantage,” PAFA curators installed a special viewing area so that the picture could be seen from several galleries away, “at the greatest distance from the landscape that the limits of the exhibition hall would admit.”<sup>181</sup> The *Daily Evening Bulletin* praised how *The Domes of the Yosemite* looked from its special viewing platform; “the *coup d’oeil* from this point,” they explained, “will be highly appreciated by visitors, and is quite a novel feature in pictorial display.”<sup>182</sup>

Such lengthy viewing distances tested the limits of his own studio. An 1871 *Home Journal* profile on the artist’s Hudson River estate emphasized the cavernous size of the built-in studio: nearly one hundred feet long, with a pair of sliding glass doors on the far end from the easel. Above the doors, Bierstadt had installed a special viewing platform, which he used “to obtain an elevated point of view when painting

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<sup>181</sup>. Installation photographs do not survive, but contemporaneous accounts suggest that two galleries were linked together to provide the long-distance view. “Bierstadt’s Domes of the Great Yo Semite,” *The Daily Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia), June 4, 1867, 3; Clarence Cook, “Mr. Bierstadt’s Last Work,” *The Evening Post* (New York), May 7, 1867, 3-4. I am grateful to Hoang Tran, PAFA’s Head Archivist, for help searching for information on the custom viewing gallery.

<sup>182</sup> “Bierstadt’s Domes of the Great Yo Semite,” 3. The term “*Coup d’oeil*,” which translates to “stroke of the eye,” originated in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century military treatises on battlefield decision-making. A *coup d’oeil* entails an ability to rapidly and intuitively recognize underlying significance, often in the face of imperfect information. J.N. Roux and J.H. van Vuuren, “Threat Evaluation and Weapon Assignment Decision Support: A Review of the State of the Art,” *ORiON* 23, no. 2 (2007): 166. Notably, by the 1860s, the term’s meaning had evolved to encompass the subject position of a prospective investor contemplating the economic prospects of faraway colonies. See for example, Virlet d’Aoust, *Coup d’oeil general sur la topographie et la géologie du Mexique et de L’Amérique Centrale* (Paris: E. Martinet, 1865); Marquis de Cosentino, *L’Algérie en 1865: coup d’oeil d’un colonisateur* (Paris: P. Dupont, 1865).

certain of his pictures.” According to the *Home Journal* critic, Bierstadt regularly painted with a long-distance view in mind, and that this vantage could potentially be more than one hundred feet from the picture. The critic then pointed to how the studio could accommodate such long distances: if the elevated platform was not far enough away, Bierstadt could open the sliding glass doors to contemplate an “object which it is desirable to see at a greater distance than even his capacious studio will admit.”<sup>183</sup>

Taking a cue from these observations, in this chapter I explore how viewing distances operate Bierstadt’s art. In doing so, I propose that *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (hereafter simply *Among the Sierra Nevada*) constructs a viewing experience wherein western space is understood to be most meaningful, most valuable, when contemplated from afar. Considered within the context of the picture’s display in London, the picture’s effects when seen at a distance take on metaphorical significance: they speak to the importance of establishing communicative and financial links between the American West and far-flung urban centers. In turn, the picture presents its maker, Bierstadt, as someone well-equipped to forge such a link.

To develop these claims, I first examine *Among the Sierra Nevada* from up close. What might make this picture unsatisfying to look at from a short distance? What about it made the *Art Journal* critic feel that it was best perceived from the far side of the gallery space? The issue, it seems, is a tension between the materiality of paint and the illusionism of the depicted scene. This tension stems from Bierstadt’s schematic approach to mark-making, which makes depicted details difficult to view

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<sup>183</sup> Harry Gray, “Homes on the Hudson,” *Home Journal* (New York), clipping dated 1871, Bierstadt Family Scrapbook, *Bierstadt Collection, 1863-1957*, Brooklyn Museum Library Special Collections, 40-43.

from up close. Much to the consternation of period art critics, who read Bierstadt's brushwork as evidence of his willful disregard for disciplined naturalism, Bierstadt's paint-handling interrupts and redirects the expected semiotic functions of brushwork. In Bierstadt's midcareer pictures, the tactile, physical qualities of Bierstadt's brushwork are regularly at odds with their referential function. In these instances, painted signs function indexically, rather than iconically. Put differently, instead of offering up individualized, naturalistic likenesses, details in Bierstadt's pictures function as conspicuous records of the predetermined compositional systems and iterative gestures that govern his approach.

Step back, however, and the appearance of Bierstadt's brushwork transforms dramatically. When seen from an unconventionally distant vantage, *Among the Sierra Nevada* resolves into a resplendent and Edenic western scene. The picture's contents seem freely available to the viewer—but only so long as they are observed from afar. Considered as a component in the production of this long view, surface facture is understood as harboring a phatic dimension: it contributes to meaning-making by emphasizing the physical context in which pictorial communication takes place, the “atmosphere in which the message is transmitted,” as Timothy Morton puts it.<sup>184</sup> In other words, Bierstadt's paint-handling reminds viewers that the image has been structured to deliver its pictorial contents across a distance.

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<sup>184</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 37. Coined by the linguist Roman Jakobson, phatic messages are “messages primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works.” Roman Jakobson, “Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Language in Literature*, eds. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 68.

*Among the Sierra Nevada* reserves its contents for those who contemplate it from far away. This dynamic resonates within the context of the picture's display in London, England. Bierstadt painted *Among the Sierra Nevada* in Rome, during a two-year stay in Europe between 1867 and 1868—his second visit to Europe—and debuted it in London, in his studio at the Langham Hotel.<sup>185</sup> Notably the Langham Hotel exhibition of *Among the Sierra Nevada* overlapped with a series of elite social engagements in which Bierstadt worked to align himself culturally and professionally with a prominent group of British financiers and industrialists—men whose status stemmed from their achievements in establishing communicative and financial linkages across the vast oceanic and continental distances that separated the American West from the United Kingdom. With its pictorial emphasis on the literal distance between the viewer and its western subject matter, *Among the Sierra Nevada* thus exemplifies a broader shift in Bierstadt's self-positioning as an American Western artist. Rather than presenting himself to European audiences as an authentic frontiersmen in the manner of George Catlin or John James Audubon, an identity based on physical proximity to or immersion within western space, Bierstadt aligned his artistic persona with certain transnational networks of commerce that enveloped

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<sup>185</sup> The picture would not reach the United States until it went on view in Boston in October 1870, after which point it had already appeared at the Langham Hotel; the Royal Academy in Berlin, Germany; the Bowles Brothers' Gallery in Paris; and the Royal Academy in London. For a chronology of these exhibitions, see Nancy K. Anderson and Linda Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art and Enterprise* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, in association with the Brooklyn Museum, 1990), 188.

and exploited the West and its natural resources from a continent plus an ocean way.<sup>186</sup>

### Viewing Distances and Nineteenth-Century Painting

Given its resonance with a parallel culture of transatlantic finance, *Among the Sierra Nevada* invites a broader conversation about the meanings attributed to viewing distances in nineteenth-century painting. Viewing distances remain an understudied phenomenon. The topic occasionally surfaces in scholarship, but rarely as an object of inquiry in its own right. Despite the widespread popular advice that viewers should step back to take in an Impressionist painting—to watch virtuosic, expressive brushwork coalesce into a pictorial illusion—or Walter Benjamin’s oft-cited characterization of the “aura” of art as the “unique phenomenon of a distance,” the cultural significance of the long-distance view has received relatively little art historical attention.<sup>187</sup> Studies of brushwork in painting tend to rely on a close vantage

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<sup>186</sup> On Audubon’s self-fashioning as a frontier woodsman while in London, see Gregory Nobles, *John James Audubon: The Nature of the American Woodsman* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). Catlin’s English celebrity is discussed in Christopher Mulvey, “George Catlin in Europe,” in *George Catlin and his Indian Gallery*, eds. George Gurney and Therese Thau Heyman (Washington, DC: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2002), 63-86.

<sup>187</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 222. This relative lack of attention to long-viewing distance in the study of painting stands in contrast to the study of sculpture, with the seminal essay on this topic being Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in idem., *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148-172. In addition to Fried, F. David Martin offers a provocative discussion of how the space between viewer and work is a defining trait of sculpture in Martin, *Sculpture and Enlivened Space: Aesthetics and History* (Lexington: University Press of Kansas, 1981). Martin also argues that the “enlivened” quality of this space categorically

point, focusing on the minutiae of brushwork and the work of signification as it plays out a few feet—or even a few inches—from the picture.<sup>188</sup> Physical closeness is also an integral part of the experience of a trompe l’oeil painting, in that the viewer’s navigation of nearness plays an important role in determining the effectiveness of pictorial illusionism, often in ways that active the sense of touch.<sup>189</sup> Approaches focused on short viewing distances are invaluable, but they offers only a partial account of brushwork’s role in the production of meaning in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, studies of nineteenth-century landscape painting tend to privilege the meanings that arise from the lateral sweep of the look rather than its projection across

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differentiates painting from sculpture. For more on this point, see idem., “The Autonomy of Sculpture,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34, no. 3 (Spring, 1976): 273-286. For additional examples of scholarship attentive to the meanings produced by the space between viewer and work, see Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 38-59, particularly Potts’ discussion of surface finish and sensuality in Antony Canova’s marbles, as well as Kirk Savage, *Monument Wars: Washington D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the Memorial Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 228-236, particularly Savage’s consideration of how viewers engage phenomenologically with Henry Merwin Shrady’s *Ulysses S. Grant Memorial* on the National Mall.

<sup>188</sup> For examples of this approach, see Ewa Lajer-Burcharth, *The Painter’s Touch: Boucher, Chardin, Fragonard* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018); James D. Herbert, *Brushwork and Emergence: Courbet, Impressionism, Picasso* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Nicola Suthor, *Rembrandt’s Roughness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018). For contrasting approaches, which foreground the effects of brushwork when seen from afar, see Ernst van de Wetering, *Rembrandt: The Painter at Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 163-165; Bernadine Barnes, *Michelangelo and the Viewer in His Time* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), which includes an illuminating discussion of the relationship between viewing distances and architecture in Renaissance painting.

<sup>189</sup> Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 125-152.

space, particularly as this sweep relates to the scopic regime of the panorama, with its accompanying ties to the ideologies of colonial and imperial expansion.<sup>190</sup>

Nonetheless, there is ample evidence to suggest that nineteenth-century artists and critics were attuned to the effects of their pictures when seen from a distance (an interest that is, of course, not limited to the nineteenth century). By the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the relationship between painterly technique, viewing distance, and pictorial illusionism had become a central component of Impressionist pictorial theory, with critics offering advice on how artists should apply paint in anticipation of a viewer's experience from a certain vantage, with various artists choosing to heed or disregard this advice.<sup>191</sup> This interest was not confined to the

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<sup>190</sup> The literature on the intersection of landscape painting and the panorama is extensive. Helpful introductions to the topic include Kevin J. Avery, "The Heart of the Andes' Exhibited: Frederic E. Church's Window on the Equatorial World," *The American Art Journal* 18, no. 1 (Winter, 1986): 52-72; Allison Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 27-78; Angela Miller, "The Panorama, The Cinema, and the Emergence of the Spectacular," *Wide Angle* 18, no. 2 (April 1996): 34-69; Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: A History of a Mass Medium* (New York: Zone Books, 1997). For a more recent approach to the topic, one that complicates the customary link between a panoramic viewpoint and the notion of colonial mastery, see Jennifer Raab, *Frederic Church: The Art and Science of Detail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), especially 65-85.

<sup>191</sup> The increased attention paid to viewing distances by the Impressionists has been linked to a bourgeois mode of subjectivity, in which the viewer's variable and individualized experience in front of a painting took precedence over a rationalized and fixed system of linear perspective in which meaning is delivered to viewers through a mathematically determined projection into space. Anthea Callen, "Technique and Gender, Landscape, Ideology and the Art of Monet in the 1890s," in *Gendering Landscape Art*, eds. Steven Adams and Anna Gruetzner Robins (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2000), 32; idem., *The Art of Impressionism: Painting Technique & the Making of Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 201-202; John House, *Monet: Nature Into Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 83. Within this context, scholars have

Impressionists. Rachael DeLue has pointed out that stepping back was a “commonly acknowledged necessity” in assessing the merits of landscape paintings during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>192</sup> Additionally, painters such as Winslow Homer, John Singer Sargent, and James McNeil Whistler experimented with different viewing distances in their work, sometimes using the threshold between paint and illusionism to push viewers away from their works so as to obtain a particular visual effect.<sup>193</sup> Driving viewers away from the canvas could serve as a means of drawing the viewer’s attention to the technical virtuosity of the artist, to their ability to manipulate the illusionism of painting to dramatic effect, but it could also speak to the aesthetic and philosophical commitments underlying the artist’s relationship to nature. Homer, for instance, wanted the space between the viewer and his seascapes to approximate the space between him and his depicted subject when he worked in the field, suggesting that he used viewing distance as a vehicle to communicate something essential about his own subject position in relation to the natural world.<sup>194</sup>

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observed how the works of certain painters from this period, particularly Édouard Manet, refuse to coalesce at a distance, suggesting that artists manipulated and contested the meaning of the long view during the late nineteenth century. Suzanne Singletary, *James McNeill Whistler in France: A Dialogue in Paint, Poetry, and Music* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 87.

<sup>192</sup> Rachael DeLue, *George Inness and the Science of Landscape* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 216.

<sup>193</sup> Marc Simpson, “You Must Wait, and Wait Patiently,” in *Weatherbeaten: Winslow Homer and Maine*, ed. Thomas A. Denenberg (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 115, n. 87, and Simpson, *Like Breath on Glass: Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 31, 105.

<sup>194</sup> I am grateful to Maggie Adler for her in-depth knowledge of Homer’s interest in viewing distances, particularly in relation to his Maine seascapes. Adler is not the only scholar who has noted Homer’s interest in lengthy viewing distances. Marc Simpson



Homer's paintings, like Bierstadt's, indicate that long viewing distances harbor historically-bounded cultural, semiotic, and phenomenological meanings. In the case of Bierstadt, viewing distances are bound up in issues of delivery—the “packing and storage” of a pictorial message for transmission to viewers.<sup>195</sup> In his pictures—much to the consternation of period critics—iconic likenesses cohere only when seen from an unconventionally distant vantage point, a vantage that was sometimes unobtainable because it exceeded the physical boundaries of the gallery space. This dynamic speaks ultimately to the technological transmission and delivery of messages between sites of natural resource extraction in the American West and financial centers in the American Northeast and London—a financial and communicative system that was in development in the 1860s, but not yet fully obtained. This reading is supported by a close reading of Bierstadt's pictures themselves, as well as a discussion of both

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has recently proposed that contemporary museum hanging practices may have inadvertently suppressed this aspect of Homer's art. Marc Simpson, “‘If You Can Read This . . .’: Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream* and the Viewing of His Pictures,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 4:1 (Spring 2018), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.1638> (last accessed March 4, 2019). Simpson's interest in the view of paintings from afar and the hostility of contemporary installation practices to long-distance viewing finds a parallel in Thomas Crow's reexamination of Mark Rothko's work: Thomas Crow, “The Marginal Difference in Rothko's Abstraction,” in *Seeing Rothko*, eds. Glenn Phillips and Thomas Crow (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2005), 25-39.

<sup>195</sup> Jennifer Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 164. In using the term “delivery,” I draw from Jennifer Roberts study of issues of transit in American art. Roberts' attentiveness to how “real and illusionary transport might emerge as parallel or analogous concerns in works of art” proved integral to the development of this chapter.

Bierstadt's art critical reception and the circumstances of the exhibition of *Among the Sierra Nevada* at the Langham Hotel.

### **Looking Closely at *Among the Sierra Nevada***

Painted in 1868, *Among the Sierra Nevada* harbors a subtle but fundamental shift in Bierstadt's approach to landscape depiction. This shift is evident in how his paint-handling appears when seen from up close, just a few feet from the surface of the picture. In *Among the Sierra Nevada*, brushwork rebuffs the viewer as they attempt to discern depicted details, ultimately preventing them from imaginatively entering into the scene. The physical tactility of paint asserts itself in a way that counteracts and undermines its expected illusionistic function. In effect, the picture refuses to function as an Albertian window on the world, a view through a transparent plane to a landscape.

This dynamic is both a continuation and a transformation of the problems in viewing that I previously identified in the foreground of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie* (fig. 3.4). *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* invites viewers to imaginatively step into and move through the scene, but it does so specifically in order to call into question the value of experiencing nature in this way. Bierstadt's precise and dexterous brushwork was key to this peculiar mode of encounter, for it drew viewers close to the picture plane with the promise of hidden insights. Carefully rendered foreground elements, such as the dead deer in the grass, with its mottled coat, stiffened limbs, and a pulled-back neck, encourage the close examination of individual forms (fig. 3.5). This encounter sets up the disconcerting realization that the rest of the mountain terrain refuses to allow its contents to be perceptible in this way. And this,

ultimately, serves to analogize the fragile epistemology of lode mining in the American West, namely the unknowability of subterranean spaces.

At first, *Among the Sierra Nevada* seems to retract the threat posed in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*. The pine grove on the lower right of the 1868 picture is welcoming (fig. 3.6). Just above the water's edge, ribbons of sunlight fall onto the trees, where they dangle from weathered bark or lie heaped among exposed roots. With each tree carrying the sunlight differently, they showcase Bierstadt's attentiveness to the variations of light and texture. The experience is haptic: one might imagine striding through the glen, reaching out to touch each delicately illuminated surface. Indeed, there is a reward for this type of encounter: a pair of pines that cling to the edge of an eroding bluff. One is young, small, and foliated; the other is bare and lifeless. Positioned side-by-side, they offer a symbolic pairing of life and death, of regeneration and decay—a fairly common motif in landscapes from the period, and one intended to couple the viewer's experience of nature with thoughts of the divine.

But the glen offers only a momentary haven. Dark shadows behind the bluff prevent passage deeper into space, requiring the viewer to follow the tilt of gently sloping ground down toward the lake. The slope quickly gives way to the strong orthogonal of the receding trees (3.7). The orthogonal pulls eye out of the glen and toward the center of the picture, depositing it near a herd of elk standing silhouetted against the reflection of mountain topography. It is here, in the company of these animals that a problem starts to emerge.

The problem is one of paint-handling. Consider the body of the leftmost cow (fig. 3.8). As this cow looks alertly across the lake, a strip of sunlight falls across her shadowed torso, catching the eye with its interplay of sunlight and shadow—much like

the nearby trees in the glen. Bierstadt was also careful to delineate the hock of the rear leg, adding touches of white and chestnut to show the press of the hip bone against the overlaying skin. However, this presentation of animal musculature is incomplete; it is confined to just the back half of the animal. On the front half, just two uniform brushstrokes—one dark-brown, one ochre—take on the work of signifying forelegs. They do this poorly. The legs are disproportionally narrow and anatomically ambiguous. It is as if the deer's torso were propped atop a sawhorse.

How, exactly, is the viewer to respond to this contrast in levels of detail? Does the reductive treatment of the elk's forelegs signal that the body is inconsequential staffage, a pleasing incident but not one worth dwelling on? Or does the interlocking armature of skin and bone along the same animal's hindquarters invite careful scrutiny? The elk proposes both possibilities, and it does not offer a clear path toward their resolution.<sup>196</sup>

Additional tensions of depiction soon emerge. Much like the leading elk's rear legs, other animal bodies hint at a wealth of visual and narrative information only to abruptly withdraw it. For example, the two leftmost cows are distinguished in size, pose, and action: one drinks, while her companion fixates on a point somewhere across the lake. Behind them, standing on the shore, a third turns toward the viewer, perhaps responding to the belated arrival of a trailing companion to the right. Dispersed across the herd, these four bodies introduce an interplay of narrative

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<sup>196</sup> To be clear, I point out this tension not to make a qualitative judgment against the picture. Bierstadt could render the minutiae of animal anatomy when he wanted to; his plein air horse studies from the late 1850s and early 1960s make this clear. But he chose not to in this instance, even though the elk figure prominently in the center of the composition. The question that emerges is why.

juxtapositions: parings of wariness and repose, greeting and arrival. But at the same time, three of the elk—including the leading cow—share an identical, left-facing profile (figs. 3.9-11). Two even bear the same stilt-like legs, each drawn with a single brushstroke. These duplicated forms temper the narrative dynamism of the herd. They produce an uncanny sameness. This reiteration interrupts the picture's illusionism to remind the viewer of the artifice that underlies the scene.<sup>197</sup>

Additional bothersome repetitions are evident elsewhere in the foreground, such as the flock of ducks in the lower left (fig. 3.12). The birds are evidently all of the same species, as indicated by their shared coloration and wing-markings. But they are also all products of the same schematic process of mark-making. Take the two ducks shown bursting from the reed bed, wings outstretched, necks straining with accelerative effort. Both exhibit the same shadowed underbelly, rendered in a uniform black, the same white wing marks touched on with the same vertical brushstrokes, and the same reflection, affixed patch-like to the water's surface. If Bierstadt had not angled one of the two birds slightly on its axis—an effect obtained by altering the placement of the leftmost wing, a simple adjustment rather than a complex reconfiguration of the bird in space—they would be visually and compositionally identical.

This duplication produces relatively little information. Bierstadt's invariant handling signals that the birds are of a flock, but beyond this, little else. It does not

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<sup>197</sup> This is not the only instance of the serial duplication of animal bodies in Bierstadt's art. For an additional example of the uncanny repetitiveness of Bierstadt's approach to rendering animals, see the four bison staggered parallel to the picture plane in *Sunset on the Plains* (n.d.), in the collection of the Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles.

offer insights into the nuances of the ducks' movements, anatomy, coloration, or behavior. The serial repetition of the animal body in motion does not grant the viewer a more comprehensive or in-depth knowledge of the depicted subject.<sup>198</sup> This seems to be repetition for repetition's sake, a proliferation of detail without a readily identifiable purpose. It is as if the elk and ducks never seriously meant to draw attention to themselves. Caught in the viewer's gaze, they start to divulge their lack of mimetic content.

This is not the only picture by Bierstadt from this period in which the signifying capacity of animal bodies seems to falter. In the contemporaneous *Buffalo Trail, The Impending Storm* (fig. 3.13), a herd of bison crosses a prairie stream. Much like the leading cow of *Among the Sierra Nevada*, the tactility of paint along the leading bison's contours is prominent. The animal exhibits a conspicuous layering of unblended paints: a warm ochre daubed atop a dark brown. Hastily applied, the ochre overlay sprawls beyond the animal's contours, creating an indistinct edge where one would expect shoulders and hips to round sharply into space. The trailing bison are even more elusive. Scattered among the grass they are, quite frankly, blobs.

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<sup>198</sup> On the repetition of animal bodies in animal paintings see Alexander Nemerov, "Haunted Supermasculinity: Strength and Death in Carl Rungius's 'Wary Game,'" *American Art*, 13, no. 3 (Autumn, 1999): 4-5. On the meaning of serialized repetitions of the animal body in Muybridge, see John Ott, "Netted Together: Eadweard Muybridge's Animal Locomotion at the Dawn of Comparative Biology," in *A Greene Country Towne: Philadelphia's Ecology in the Cultural Imagination*, ed. Alan Braddock, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), 81-95. I should note that Bierstadt painted *Among the Sierra Nevada* nine years before Eadweard Muybridge began his studies in motion photography, so it would be anachronistic to suggest a link between the two bodies of work.

Bierstadt's seemingly haphazard handling of animal bodies did not escape the attention of nineteenth-century viewers. Describing Bierstadt's treatment of foreground motifs, B.P. Avery, a San Francisco critic, lamented that "there are others who realize details more carefully, who paint figures and animals better, who finish more smoothly."<sup>199</sup> Likewise, an anonymous critic for *Watson's Weekly Art Journal* noted Bierstadt's apparent carelessness rendering fine details and suggested that "a closer individualism in the foreground [of *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California* (1865)] would, we think, have given a greater additional interest to the picture."<sup>200</sup> Whether Bierstadt intended for his animal bodies to be read illusionistically, as naturalistic depictions of specific species, or connotatively, as stylized markers of westernness, his paint-handling proved disruptive enough for period critics to single out their forms as at odds with the expected function of foreground details.

The intrusive presence of brushwork is not limited to Bierstadt's depictions of animals. Critical responses to Bierstadt's brushwork were not limited to the examination of individual details. A critic for the *Times*, after viewing *Among the Sierra Nevada* at the Royal Academy in London in the summer of 1868, noted that Bierstadt's seemingly ham-handed handling disrupted the integrity of the picture as a whole. "Mr. Bierstadt's picture is very puzzling," the critic reflected, "here seems to be everything to kindle the imagination, yet the imagination is but languidly stirred." The critic then questioned whether the brushwork might be to blame. "Does the uniform distribution of care and finish prevent that focusing of attention and interest,

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<sup>199</sup> B. P. Avery, "Art Beginnings on the Pacific, II," *Overland Monthly*, 1, no. 2 (August 1868): 114.

<sup>200</sup> "National Academy of Design," *Watson's Weekly Art Journal*, May 20, 1865, 20.

which seem necessary conditions of awakening the imagination?”<sup>201</sup> The problem, the critic suggested, was not merely one of clarity of detail, but also a certain stunting of affect. Bierstadt’s paint-handling seemed to result in a muted emotive response to the contents of the scene.

Returning to *Among the Sierra Nevada*, one finds that Bierstadt’s paint-handling also mediates an encounter with the depicted mountain topography. Moving across the lake, the eye does not land on the *terra firma* of a clearly defined ground plane; rather, it bogs down in paint. Bierstadt worked *alla prima* around the central waterfall, sweeping heaps of tan and off-white onto the bluff’s contours, leaving them to sag like damp cobwebs (fig. 3.14). The paint is viscous, seeming to seep and coil down the steep mountainside. If the impasto signals the texture of stone by virtue of its unevenness, the whorled brushwork recalls the fluidity of mud more than solid rock. The texture does not read as grounded, as geological, as a demonstration of forces of sedimentation and erosion. It is too aqueous to convey the fissures and abrasions indicative of underlying geological processes.<sup>202</sup> Pointing to this part of the picture, a critic for the *Boston Post* lamented the “the incomplete and sketchy way in which

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<sup>201</sup> “Exhibit of the Royal Academy,” *The Times* (London, UK), May 19, 1869, 5.

<sup>202</sup> This aspect of Bierstadt’s pictures is discussed in more detail in Chapter One, but for helpful introductions to the relationship between American Western landscape paintings and geological science, see Joni Kinsey, *Thomas Moran and the Surveying of the American West* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) and Diana Seave Greenwald, “The Big Picture: Thomas Moran’s *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* and the Development of the American West,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 175-210. For a broader discussion of the relationship between nineteenth-century landscape painting and geological science, see Rebecca Bailey Bedell, *The Anatomy of Nature: Geology & American Landscape Painting, 1825-1875* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).



certain parts of [*Among the Sierra Nevada*] are done,” particularly the “cliff on the left, which, though impressive from its height, is imperfectly worked out and is dull and lifeless in tone.”<sup>203</sup>

As the critic’s remarks suggest, this glittery morass does not read easily as a virtuosic display of bravura brushwork. For one, the coloration is too rudimentary. There are four hues: off-white, tan, caramel, and a grey-tinged umber. Applied to the support with minimal blending, they occupy separate and identifiably distinct registers. The brushwork does seem to evoke something “imperfectly worked out”: colors have been laid down, topographical features blocked out and mostly filled in, but Bierstadt has not yet blended the picture’s constituent elements into a unified, illusionistic depiction. Consequently, these details subtly but insistently direct the viewer’s attention toward the maneuvers that led to its creation. In this sense, they signify demonstratively as much as they signify illusionistically. Put another way, these details serve to illustrate the governing pictorial logic that led to their creation, as opposed to an intrinsic order of nature.

*Yosemite* (fig. 3.15), which Bierstadt painted two years after *Among the Sierra Nevada*, further visualizes this point. Like the earlier picture, *Yosemite* stages a tension between the illusionism of the depicted subject and the visual record of its execution in paint. This duality takes place prominently in the center of the composition. On the sunlit knoll that anchors the foreground, puffs of green, yellow, and red, all tapped on with the tip of a tough brush, rendering grass as an indistinct haze (fig. 3.16). A lone boulder, cleft by yellow-green shrubbery, rests in the middle of the scene, illuminated

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<sup>203</sup> “‘Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains,’ by Bierstadt,” *Boston Post*, October 11, 1869, 4.

along one side. Along this sunlit face, a thin scrim of white and yellow drapes over the partially-exposed canvas weave, creating a textural interplay between paint and support that renders the boulder slightly out of focus. The result is a paradoxical viewing experience: the closer and harder one looks at the boulder, the more fugitive its likeness is.

This instance of blur, and the concomitant challenges of viewing that it introduces, raises the question of whether Bierstadt's work might harbor within it an intermedial connection with photography—a digression that helps illuminate an important aspect of Bierstadt's engagement with distance. It is possible that Bierstadt's brushwork in *Yosemite* analogizes the properties of photography, evoking the arbitrary forms that emerge in a photographic image thanks to technical miscalibrations of focus, exposure, or printing.<sup>204</sup> It is a documented fact that Bierstadt worked from photographic studies (at least early in his career), and scholars occasionally question how stereographs might have informed his pictorial style, particularly in regards to his early American Western pictures and his early paintings of the White Mountains of New Hampshire.<sup>205</sup> Perhaps the blurred boulder signals the

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<sup>204</sup> For recent studies of the meanings attributed to blur in nineteenth-century landscape photography, see James Nisbet, "Atmospheric Cameras and Ecological Light in the Landscape Photographs of Eadweard Muybridge," *Photography and Culture* 6, no. 2 (July 2013): 131-156 and Marnin Young, "Photography and the Philosophy of Time: On Gustave Le Gray's Great Wave, Sète," *Nonsite.org*, May 3, 2016, last accessed January 1, 2020. <https://nonsite.org/article/photography-and-the-philosophy-of-time>.

<sup>205</sup> M. Lindquist-Cook, "Stereoscopic Photography and the Western Paintings of Albert Bierstadt," *The Art Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (1970): 361-378; Kristen M. Jensen, "Seeing in Stereo: Albert Bierstadt and the Stereographic Landscape," *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century Culture* 12, no. 2 (Autumn, 2013). <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn13/jensen-on-albert-bierstadt-and->

painting's dependency on an archive of supporting photographic images. In this reading, the blur lays claim to a rhetoric of objectivity by recreating the incidental visual effects that sometimes result from the camera's standardized procedures for fixing an image.<sup>206</sup> Alternatively, perhaps the blur reflects a cross-media rivalry between a painter and his photographer peers, such as Carleton Watkins and Eadweard Muybridge.<sup>207</sup> If so, *Yosemite's* indistinct foreground would speak instead to the limitations of photography so as to overcome them in painting, leaping past the blurry boulder to an expansive, sunlit valley, a space that colorfully showcases the aspects of Western space capturable only through painting.<sup>208</sup> However, intermedial connections between Bierstadt's paintings and photography should be approached with caution.<sup>209</sup>

This distinction between Bierstadt's paintings and a potential photographic source stems from how photography was conceptualized as a communication technology in the mid nineteenth century. As Simone Natale has emphasized,

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the-stereographic-landscape (last accessed 2-09-2020). For an approach that cautions against overdetermining the significance of photography to Bierstadt, see Matthew Baigell, *Albert Bierstadt* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1981), 13.

<sup>206</sup> On this point, I draw from Richard Shiff, "Realism of Low Resolution: Digitisation and Modern Painting," in *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era*, ed. Terry Smith (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 125-156.

<sup>207</sup> On Muybridge's friendship with Bierstadt, see Hendricks, *Albert Bierstadt*, 208-213. Watkins' relation to Bierstadt is detailed in Tyler Green, *Carleton Watkins: Making the West American* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 367-71.

<sup>208</sup> Thanks to Tyler Green for sharing his thoughts on a Bierstadt-Watkins rivalry with me during his visit to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in October of 2019.

<sup>209</sup> Indeed, the following chapter instead contextualizes certain formal peculiarities in Bierstadt's paintings via reference to cartography as opposed to photography.

photography was one of a number of new technological systems that facilitated new forms of intersubjective contact across great distances. In its portability, “photography was conceived as a medium that put images in movement, allowing pictures taken from reality to be carried, marketed, and transported.”<sup>210</sup> Photographs thus collapsed previous conceptualizations of space and time, allowing eyes “to see what they had previously not been able to reach.”<sup>211</sup> What is relevant here is that this collapse of perceived distance was regularly described in relation to travel, in terms of an intense sense of physical and sensorial proximity to what was depicted in the photographic image.

Oliver Wendell Holmes famously described the transportive properties of stereography in his now seminal series of essays on the medium for *The Atlantic*. Writing in 1865, Holmes described how he felt plunged into an experience of intense proximity to the contents of a stereographic image. “The scraggy branches of a tree in the foreground run out at us as if they would scratch our eyes out,” he exclaimed, underscoring the embodied component of the encounter by ascribing it a haptic dimension.<sup>212</sup> Holmes then linked this sensation to an experience of tourism. Those

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<sup>210</sup> Simone Natale, “A Mirror with Wings: Photography and the New Era of Communications,” in *Photography & Other Media*, eds. Nicoletta Leonardi and Simone Natale (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 35. On the close relationship of photography and the postal system, see David M. Henkin, “The Travelling Daguerreotype: Early Photography and the U.S. Postal System,” in *Photography and Other Media*, 47-56.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>212</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” *Atlantic Monthly* 3, no. 20 (June 1859): 744. For more on the haptic dimension of stereography, see Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Colossal: Engineering the Suez Canal, Statue of Liberty*,

who possessed stereographs, Homes explained, could traverse key sites across Europe at a moment's notice, merely by flipping from card to card.<sup>213</sup> With statements like Holmes' in mind, Joan M. Schwartz has claimed that "the photograph became a surrogate for travel at a time when travel was the premier avenue to knowledge of the world."<sup>214</sup> The magic of photography stemmed in part from its ability to rematerialize a faraway space in the hands of viewer, so as to facilitate a powerful feeling of contact with a real place or person.

Bierstadt's midcareer landscapes do not afford this embodied proximity. The schematic and invariant paint-handling in pictures such as *Yosemite* or *Among the Sierra Nevada* short-circuits a viewing experience premised on a sensation of physical traversal within and through the depicted scene.<sup>215</sup> Moreover, part of Holmes' fascination with the stereograph stemmed from the fact that the viewer encountered a scene that seemed inexhaustible in its presentation of details, and that these details were transcribed from nature without the mediating presence of the artist. Viewing a

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*Eiffel Tower, and Panama Canal: Transcontinental Ambition in France and the United States during the Long Nineteenth Century* (New York: Prestel, 2012), 122.

<sup>213</sup> For a recent analysis of stereography's transportive qualities, see Jeffrey Richmond-Moll, "Roots/Routes: Religion and Modern Mobility in American Art, 1900-1935" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Delaware, 2019), 35-106.

<sup>214</sup> Joan M. Schwartz, "Records of Simple Truth and Precision": Photography, Archives, and the Illusion of Control," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 14. See also, Anne M. Lyden, *Railroad Vision: Photography, Travel, and Perception* (Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003), 36.

<sup>215</sup> As if to reinforce this, when *Among the Sierra Nevada* appeared at the Langham Hotel, it appeared alongside *Mount Vesuvius at Midnight*, a depiction of the mountain's 1868 eruption. The picture literally bombards its charred and burnt foreground with flaming projectiles, turning it into an utterly inhospitable vantage.

stereograph fostered an illusion of experiencing the scene firsthand, rather than a record of the artist's encounter.<sup>216</sup> Yet in a work like *Among the Sierra Nevada*, pictorial details circle back stubbornly to the expedient process that produced them, to their morphological structure as the artist's fabrication.

What, then, do Bierstadt's pictures offer that differs from stereography's transportive dimension? What type of encounter with western space did *Among the Sierra Nevada* offer its London viewers, if not one of travel? An answer may lie in period criticism. Bierstadt's invariant handling did not escape the attention of nineteenth century art critics, who jumped on Bierstadt's brushwork and the viewing experience that it afforded viewers as evidence of his disregard for the higher ideals of landscape painting. In highlighting Bierstadt's artistic critical reception—specifically, the ways that critics misunderstood his pictures—a clearer picture of the role of Bierstadt's brushwork and its relationship to viewing distance emerges.

### **“A Huge Mass of Grey Paint”: Critical Perspectives on Bierstadt's Brushwork**

Art historians have given ample space to art critics' negative writing about Bierstadt, but the cultural and social motivations that inflected Bierstadt's period reception are not always brought into such discussions. Often, period criticism is treated as a substitute for the pictures themselves, with critics' dismissive tone evidencing a lack of formal and aesthetic complexity in Bierstadt's pictures.

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<sup>216</sup> Holmes described this contrast thusly: “It is a mistake to suppose one knows a stereoscopic picture when he has studied it a hundred times by the aid of the best of our common instruments.” He then compared this to the experience of looking at a painting: “In a picture you can find nothing which the artist has not seen before you.” Holmes, “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph,” 742, 744.

Conversely, in efforts to recuperate Bierstadt's reputation, period criticism has been dismissed wholesale for being fraught with regional biases that rendered it incapable of understanding the artist's true motivations in painting the American West.<sup>217</sup> Rarely in either context is Bierstadt's reception discussed with an eye to tracking the intersections and divergences between the pictures themselves and how they are presented in art critical discourse. Nineteenth-century art critics recognized key formal peculiarities of Bierstadt's paintings, a number of which have gone undiscussed in twentieth and twenty-first century scholarship; however, such critics ultimately misunderstood the significance of these particularities, an omission that is attributable to the intersectional factors that informed art critical writing in the nineteenth century.

Specifically, period critics struggled to come to terms with the surface facture of Bierstadt's landscapes. They found it too conspicuous, too intrusive, a material presence that seemed at odds with the integrity and clarity of the depicted scene. Confronted with Bierstadt's problematic approach to surface finish, they came to a shared conclusion: in their eyes, Bierstadt's brushwork offered evidence that the artist was not committed to disciplined naturalism. His methods of applying paint to canvas were indicative of his inattentiveness toward his chosen subject, of his carelessness as a painter.

Critics read Bierstadt's perceived carelessness through the lens of class. They argued that Bierstadt had given up the demanding labor of naturalistic depiction to pursue the gratification of a mass audience for art that had recently emerged in American society. In other words, the problems in viewing that Bierstadt's brushwork

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<sup>217</sup> See Hassrick, *Albert Bierstadt*.

engendered signaled to critics that his paintings had been produced with the sole aim of profiting from popular taste—an interpretive stance that ultimately led such critics to overlook the significance and intended audience of Bierstadt’s landscapes.

If there is a shared aesthetic foundation for this critical opposition to Bierstadt, it derives from the aesthetic principles of the nineteenth-century English critic John Ruskin. Ruskin, although he never visited the United States, emerged in the 1860s as a dominant voice in American criticism. His ascendancy is attributable in no small part to a devoted circle of artists and critics in New York and Boston who disseminated his ideas to an artgoing public, first through excerpts, commentaries, and correspondence published in niche journals such as *The Crayon* (founded 1855), *The New Path* (founded 1863), and later through criticism in prominent national periodicals such as *The Nation*.<sup>218</sup> Thanks to these efforts, by the mid-1860s Ruskin’s ideas were well-established as the primary lens through which American critics discussed landscape paintings, both in terms of the quality of individual works and the broader societal function of the genre.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that a specific and unified strain of Ruskinian criticism motivated art critical disapproval of Bierstadt and his work.

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<sup>218</sup> On Ruskin’s aesthetic influence in the United States, see Linda Ferber and William Gerdts, *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites* (Brooklyn, New York: Schocken Books, 1985) and Roger B. Stein, *John Ruskin and Aesthetic Thought in America, 1840-1900* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). Recent studies of Ruskin’s influence in the United States include *Unto This Last: Two Hundred Years of John Ruskin*, ed. Tim Barringer (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for British Art in association with Yale University Press, 2019) and *The American Pre-Raphaelites: Radical Realists*, eds. Linda S. Ferber and Nancy K. Anderson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, in association with the National Gallery of Art, 2018).



Ruskin's ideas were received in the United States more as a diffuse set of governing principles—"a loose but convincing system where art, religion and nature were inextricably intertwined"—rather than a rigorous and well-bounded discourse.<sup>219</sup> And they formed part of a nineteenth-century art critical discourse that was neither unified nor internally coherent.<sup>220</sup> Critics molded and rejected prevailing aesthetic trends to suit not just their own beliefs, but their own class interests, collecting practices, and professional ambitions.<sup>221</sup> Given these factors, it is not always possible—or useful—to trace a critic's opinions back to a fully developed aesthetic philosophy.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Stein, *John Ruskin*, 41. This is not to suggest that insightful scholarship analyzing the American reception of Ruskin's ideas does not exist. For instance, see Karen L. Georgi, "Defining Landscape Painting in Nineteenth-Century American Critical Discourse. Or, Should Art 'Deal in Wares the Age Has Need of'?" *Oxford Art Journal*, 29, no. 2 (2006): 227-245; idem., "Summer Camp with William J. Stillman: Looking at Nature, between Ruskin and Emerson," *American Art* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 22-41.

<sup>220</sup> Rachael DeLue emphasizes that the terms of nineteenth-century art critical discourse are "of course, hard to pin down, in part because they were used at the time to describe a wide range of landscape practices and styles." DeLue, *George Inness*, 9. See also Margaret C. Conrads, *Winslow Homer and the Critics: Forging a National Art in the 1870s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>221</sup> For an insightful set of case studies on the motivations driving critical discourse in the middle of the nineteenth century, see Georgi, *Critical Shift: Rereading Jarves, Cook, Stillman, and the Narratives of Nineteenth-century American Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013).

<sup>222</sup> Also, one should note that personal grudges may have motivated the critical backlash against Bierstadt. The artist was not particularly well-liked in certain circles of the New York art world, for reasons not limited to his paintings. In one example of his alleged malfeasance, in 1872 Bierstadt was reportedly asked to manage \$10,000 of funds raised by a New York committee to purchase a portrait by William Page of Admiral David Glasgow Farragut and ship it as a gift to the Grand Duke Alexei Alexandrovich of Russia. Bierstadt allegedly only delivered \$6,200 of the \$10,000 to Page. Bierstadt then absconded for California, leaving the committee to work out a

Because of the multiplicity of critical voices at midcentury, it is perhaps best to simply note that Ruskin's ideas sharpened a period interest in surface finish as evidence of a landscape painter's commitment to certain forms of mimetic artistic work, and that, as a result, pictures such as *Among the Sierra Nevada* flouted a key aesthetic quality that a spectrum of nineteenth-century critics would have been familiar with and primed to recognize.<sup>223</sup>

The most prominent and vocal critic of Bierstadt's approach to painting was the New York writer Clarence Cook. Born in Dorchester, Massachusetts and educated at Harvard, Cook emerged in the 1860s as one of the leading proponents of Ruskin's thought in the United States. Writing first for *The New Path* and later for *The Nation*, *The New York Leader*, and the *New York Daily Tribune*, he lobbied landscape painters to commit to a rigorous naturalism marked by *plein air* study and a localized attention to detail. This sensibility reflected an elitist worldview: Cook believed that the landscape genre should function didactically, training uneducated viewers to contemplate the natural world with the same disciplined intensity of the artist,

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compromise with Page. "State and Studio," *The Evening Star* (New York), January 6, 1872.

<sup>223</sup> On the cultural importance of surface finish during this period, see Eleanor Jones Harvey, *The Painted Sketch: American Impressions from Nature, 1830-1880* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Museum of Art, 1998), 8; Matthias Kruger, "Jean-Leon Gerome, His Badger and His Studio," in *Hiding Making, Showing Creation: The Studio from Turner to Tacita Dean*, eds. Rachael Esner, Sandra Kisters, Ann-Sophie Lehmann (Amsterdam, EU: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 43-61.

geologist, or naturalist working in the field.<sup>224</sup> Surface finish plays a prominent role in Cook's charge for the genre; it served to provoke a particular mode of viewing. By looking at intensely veristic pictures, in which brushwork seemed to fold itself around the smallest details in nature, audiences might better appreciate the spiritual rewards of a life dedicated to the study of the natural world. Cook believed that verisimilitude analogized proper habits of production and consumption in broader society.

As one might expect, Cook's belief in the importance of fastidious naturalism clashed with Bierstadt's schematic approach to mark-making, and the painter's works quickly emerged as the critic's bugbear. Time and again during the 1860s and 1870s, Cook published reviews describing how frustrating it was to view Bierstadt's paintings up close. He blamed a perceived tension between pictorial illusionism and the materiality of paint. In the eyes of Cook, Bierstadt's brushwork was too dependent on expedient, iterative, and easily reproducible gestures and motifs to be meaningfully mimetic. Although Cook ultimately overlooked the underlying significance of Bierstadt's brushwork, his reviews help to illuminate some of the key interpretive issues that arise from the painter's style.

Cook's first review of a Bierstadt landscape appeared in 1863, after he viewed *Mountain Brook* in the artist's New York studio (fig. 3.17). He was not impressed. "The sense of paint [was] too strong," he lamented. "The large boulder in the centre is not stone-like in texture, but rather a huge mass of gray paint." "Lacking in all the fine and more delicate realizations of nature," he continued, this "huge mass" functioned

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<sup>224</sup> For a detailed discussion of Cook's aesthetic sensibility, see Georgi, *Critical Shift*, 45-75. See also, William H. Gerdts, "'The Sea Is His Home': Clarence Cook Visits Fitz Hugh Lane," *The American Art Journal* 17, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 44-49.

merely as a “bold generalization of the subject.”<sup>225</sup> In Cook’s esteem, Bierstadt’s brushwork was unconvincing as a naturalistic depiction.

This soon became Cook’s refrain. He repeatedly proclaimed that the material physical qualities of Bierstadt’s brushwork were at odds with prevailing naturalistic principles.<sup>226</sup> A year after his review of *Mountain Lake*, he took on *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak* (fig. 3.18). Encountering the picture at the New York Metropolitan Sanitary Fair, Cook found the landscape’s brushwork “unpleasantly” visible. As evidence, he pointed to instances of generalization—areas where “the marks of the brush,” had not “been made to stand for scarp and fissure, crag and cranny.” *Lander’s Peak*, he concluded pithily, offered “too little geology and too much bristle.”<sup>227</sup> In other words, the picture exhibited a surplus of insufficiently or inadequately worked matter, raw material that lacked—or at least failed to live up to—its semiotic purpose.<sup>228</sup> This indicated to Cook that Bierstadt worked with insufficient care for the nuances of his chosen subject.

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<sup>225</sup> *New York Leader*, Apr. 18, 1863, quoted in Anderson and Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt*, 193.

<sup>226</sup> In 1866, Cook dismissed Bierstadt’s treatment of foreground details in *Mount Hood* (1865) for being “pliable in texture” rather than solid. Clarence Cook, “Art Critics and Reality,” *The Evening Post* (New York), April 24, 1866.

<sup>227</sup> Clarence Cook, “Notices of Recent Pictures: Bierstadt’s ‘Rocky Mountains,’” *New Path* 2 (April 1864): 160-161.

<sup>228</sup> Likewise, the *Sacramento Daily Union* claimed that the foreground trees of *Mount Hood* (1865) looked like a “jumbled obscure mass of dark green color,” which, “only by an effort of the most vivid imagination,” read as trees. “Bierstadt’s ‘Mount Hood,’” *Sacramento Daily Union*, December 28, 1866, 1. See also, “The National Academy of Design,” *The Art Journal* 1, no. 5 (May 1875): 156.

Looking at *Lander's Peak*, it is not difficult to see what Cook was complaining about. Take for instance, the large boulder resting in the lower left of the foreground (fig. 3.19). Here, *alla prima* handling introduces a discrepancy between the mass of material and an illusionistic mass. Despite displaying a textured impasto, the layers of off-white and brownish-gray are thin. Too thin. A green underlayer shows through, suggesting that Bierstadt loaded his brush unevenly when tipping in these colors.<sup>229</sup> Compounding matters, stray flecks of off-white and gray extend beyond the boulder's contours, as if Bierstadt worked hastily—not bothering to affirm the solidity of the edge before moving on to fill other parts of the picture. The resulting form poses a challenge for the viewer. The visible underlayer and indistinct edge cause the accompanying illusion of volume and depth to waver. The solid mass of granite threatens to revert into an uneven scrim of grey and white paint. Cook was right; “bristle” does appear to override “geology.”

Granted, this tension is subtle. One has to be quite close to the picture plane for the paint to undermine the solidity of the forms that Bierstadt worked to depict. Step back six or so feet and iconicity triumphs. The boulder reasserts itself as an illusionistic mass—a quite convincing one at that, unlike the stubbornly elusive boulder in *Yosemite*. The uneven layering of off-white and brown even seems to evoke a mossy overcoat. Yet having seen the unstable construction of the form up close, one is left with a nagging reminder that the form's illusionistic integrity is in no small part a function of the space between viewer and painting. This in itself is not a particularly compelling insight. Every illusionistic painting has a zero-degree of representation, a

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<sup>229</sup> Close examination of this detail showed no signs of material loss or damage that would have revealed the underlayer.

short enough viewing distance that the depicted scene reverts to its constituent materials.<sup>230</sup> But here this distance is a bit further than what might be customary—just far enough to linger as an object of attention in its own right. The space separating viewer from work introduces itself as a potential factor in the production of meaning.

Cook would go on to levy a moral argument against the way that Bierstadt's brushwork engaged viewers. In an extended review of *The Domes of Yosemite*, he admitted that the picture contained "remarkable effects of light and shade in mountains, air and water," which he all admired as "clever tricks of a skillful painter."<sup>231</sup> But he emphasized that each "clever trick" was too obvious in how it had been constructed to sustain his interest for very long. Furthermore, as "clever tricks," these details did not showcase nature but rather Bierstadt's own compositional and painterly methods, which were, in Cook's opinion, quite formulaic: "The trees on the left are of the usually blasted and broken kind that this artist seems to put in all his pictures."<sup>232</sup> In a subsequent review of *The Domes of the Yosemite*, he dismissed the trees as "a stunted sort of vegetable made after a recipe of Mr. Bierstadt's own invention, and apparently warranted good for any situation."<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Michael Podro takes up the topic of this zero-degree in Podro, *Depiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>231</sup> Clarence Cook, "Mr. Bierstadt's Last Work," 3-4.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>233</sup> Clarence Cook, "Mr. Bierstadt's Domes of the Yo-Semite," *New York Tribune*, May 11, 1867, 2. Similarly, in 1867, Cook opined that the trees in *Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie* "seem to have been manufactured rather than to have grown." Clarence Cook, "Personal: Mr. Albert Bierstadt," *The Independent* (New York), May 23, 1867, 4.

By dismissing Bierstadt's brushwork for being too transparent in the manner of its fabrication, Cook banished Bierstadt's landscapes from the realm of fine art. His justifications for doing so hinged on the perceived quality of the labor involved in their production. The implication of universal utility in the phrase "warranted good for any situation," suggests a certain generality to Bierstadt's renderings of individual forms, as if the trees in the picture were the product of a cure-all formula for rendering trees of all types, while the commercial, quasi-medicinal quality of "warranted good for any situation" characterizes the picture as a mass-produced commodity. The phrase might also carry connotations of fraud. Drawing a rhetorical link between the painting and suspect medicine, Cook seems to suggest that *The Domes of the Yosemite* offers the pictorial equivalent of snake oil.

His use of the phrase "made after a recipe of Mr. Bierstadt's own invention" also resonates in this light, revealing some of the gendered assumptions underlying his critique. As Margaret Beetham has demonstrated, the meaning of the term "recipe" was in transition during the mid-nineteenth century. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, recipe books carried predominantly masculine connotations. Used primarily in reference to instructional manuals for handicrafts and shop work, the term's contemporary associations with domesticity were not yet dominant. But with the emergence of a mass reading public, the cultural significance of the recipe book shifted into the domestic sphere as a new readership of women consumers purchased guides on a range of household tasks, particularly cooking.<sup>234</sup> Published

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<sup>234</sup> Margaret Beetham, "Of Recipe Books and Reading in the Nineteenth Century: Mrs. Beeton and her Cultural Consequences," in *The Recipe Reader: Narratives*,

amidst this cultural shift, Cook's use of the term was thus loaded with derogatory connotations of femininity. By claiming that Bierstadt worked from a "recipe," Cook implied that the artist painted indoors with predetermined techniques, rather than working outdoors in a direct, masculine encounter with nature. In Cook's view, the result of these efforts was repulsive. Describing the foreground trees as "stunted sorts of vegetables," he warns that they might be harmful to consume visually.

For Cook, fine brushwork and its appreciation were markers of manly erudition and cultivated taste. He expected brushwork to signal a painter's commitment to verisimilitude, a commitment that in turn signaled an artist's cultivated and divinely-attuned sensibility toward nature, a sensibility that he found lacking in a society that he believed was deeply materialistic. To fall back onto more expedient formulas and conventions was to reduce oneself to the uninformed tastes of the masses rather than the higher ideals of art.

Yet in arguing for this elitist approach to artmaking, Cook missed the broader cultural significance that underpins both Bierstadt's paint-handling and his approach to composition. Cook is correct that Bierstadt's pictures do not demonstrate verisimilitude; they do not aspire to the status of a pure, unmediated transcription of nature, a direct mimesis. Yet the pictorial logic that *Among the Sierra Nevada* exhibits reflects more than mere expediency on the part of the artist or a desire to cater to popular taste (to say nothing of Cook's sexist account of the aesthetic sensibilities of a so-called mass audience).

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*Contexts, Traditions*, eds. Janet Floyd, Laurel Forster (Burlington, VT.: Ashgate, 2003), 15-30.



What brushwork does in *Among the Sierra Nevada* is encourage viewers to establish distance—in this instance a literal distance between the viewer and the canvas. Bierstadt's schematic brushwork is a component of a larger compositional system calculated to call viewer's attention to an ideal vantage point that exists behind them in the gallery space. In doing so, the landscape stages for viewers a spectacle of long-distance communication.

### **Taking the Long View**

*Among the Sierra Nevada* produces distance by emphasizing size. The twelve-foot-wide picture is massive—far larger than most landscape paintings of the period. But *Among the Sierra Nevada* is not only big, it calls attention to its bigness in the manner of its composition.

The remarks of an anonymous critic for *The Albion* help to introduce the disorienting effect that Bierstadt's large canvases had on their first audiences. The critic recounted how, viewing *The Domes of the Yosemite*, he had initially felt transfixed by the “absolute grandeur of the scene depicted,” and unable to take it in its constituent parts. Gradually, though, this effect wore off. After repeat visits to the picture, he found that “judgment” could “free itself from the bias naturally conveyed to it by -the picture's size], and view the subject candidly in its bearings as an artistic composition.” Following this, a host of new problems emerged, such as the “faulty” drawing, and “off key” coloration.<sup>235</sup> The critic's remarks suggest an interplay

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<sup>235</sup> “Bierstadt's New Picture,” *The Albion* (May 11, 1867), unpaginated clipping in Bierstadt Family Scrapbook, *Bierstadt Collection, 1863-1957*, Brooklyn Museum Library Special Collections.

between part and whole—as well as a determination on the part of the critic to take in the picture in parts—an interplay in which the large-size of Bierstadt’s pictures operates in tension with an impulse to examine individual details.

A similar effect is evident in *Among the Sierra Nevada*. The contents of the picture are organized in terms of compositional relays—structuring elements designed to carry the eye from one zone of the picture to another. Taking the form of strong linear patterns, these relays create a visual dialogue between the contents of the picture and the bounding edge of the frame. The herd of elk, for example, occupy a strong diagonal that projects toward the shadowed jetty on the opposite side of the lake. (They look in this direction as well, reinforcing that the foreground is a site to look out from rather than to look at). Yet the pair of oak trees at the jetty’s edge prevent the eye from lingering in the middle ground for very long, leaning as they do toward the central waterfall. A similar visual push takes place at the falls, which connect to a stream that cuts sharply up into the mountains and toward the central peaks, which then march laterally toward the right edge of the composition. Because the background is so shallow relative to the picture plane, the redwood treetops pick up the horizon line at the far edge of the picture. But the trees do so only to carry the eye back to the foreground, starting over this visual cycle through space.<sup>236</sup>

Relays such as these intensify the physical presence of the picture within the gallery space, and they achieve this result by setting the spectator in motion. The amount of distance that the eye has to travel to follow the loop that connects the elk, jetty, waterfall, stream, peaks, horizon, redwoods, and elk (again) is significant. And if

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<sup>236</sup> One might chart a similar cyclical path along the left edge, where the waterfall takes on the work of merging foreground and background.

the viewer is standing close enough to examine the brushwork that delineates the elk's body, they have to first look directly upwards toward the mountain peaks, and then literally step to the side to follow the thrust of the composition over to the redwoods. This sets up an even more dramatic movement, as the viewer then has to take several paces back in the opposite direction to take in the left side of the picture. The picture is so large that to examine any feature at the level of brushwork requires physical movement. *Among the Sierra Nevada* turns the viewing experience into a literal journey.

This dynamic might be read in terms of exploration, with the mobile spectator analogizing Bierstadt's own travels through the Sierras.<sup>237</sup> However, this journey does not map easily enough onto the depicted topography to read clearly as a thematization of travel. For one, the relays do not follow a clearly defined ground plane. Often, the strong diagonals produced by these relays pull the eye off of the ground, or send it soaring in directions that undermine the narrative premise of a grounded spectator. Furthermore, the loops charted by these relays are flat; they always run parallel to the picture plane, carrying the viewer from one detail, to the edge of the canvas, and then back again.

Compositional relays are not the only element of *Among the Sierra Nevada* that emphasizes the largeness of the canvas. A second element takes the form of serial repetition. Individual zones of the picture are filled out iteratively, through the

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<sup>237</sup> In advancing these points, I draw from Christopher P. Heuer's reading of the effects of anamorphosis in Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* in Heuer, *Into the White: The Renaissance Arctic and the End of the Image* (New York: Zone Books, 2019), 40.

duplication of certain motifs. The herd of elk appear in a group of seven (with three of them featuring identically rendered bodies). The ducks appear in a group of eight, and the nearby reeds take up four equally sized portions of foreground space. Across the lake, the mountain stream flows past a sequence of similarly shaped, bulbous outcroppings before tipping into its own reflection (fig. 3.20). Above and to the left, a waterfall bursts into triplicate as it hits the bluffs, scattering three reflections onto the water (fig. 3.21). Towering over all of this is a central mountain that has not one, but three peaks—seven, if one counts more of the various knobs and protrusions clustered among its uppermost reaches, all of which point upward in rhyme with the three cumulous peaks to their left (3.22). It is not just that these forms are repeated, but that in many cases they exhibit similar indexical marks.

Notably, smaller versions of the same composition exist (fig. 3.23), and these lack these instances of iterative repetition. This suggests that the addition or subtraction of repeated forms served as a means of scaling the basic compositional scheme into a larger or smaller format as needed. One could read Bierstadt's willingness to use repetition in this way in terms of productive expediency, as an efficient way of painting such a large canvas. But the issue here is less a question of intent, and rather the sense that the logic of repetition hinges on the picture's immense size. As a compositional device, repetition does not contribute to or enhance the visual interest of the depicted scene; rather, it diminishes it. Repetition calls into question the interpretive significance of each detail in isolation. What repetition does instead is signal the amount of labor required to fill such a large pictorial space. Cumulatively, relays and repetition underscore that the rewards of a short-viewing distance are only partial and fragmentary. Furthermore, the way that the short viewing distance entails

physical back and forth movement, while simultaneously offering up only indistinct zones of brushwork, incites a desire to step back, to attempt to take in the picture as a whole rather than in incomplete parts.

As of 2018, *Among the Sierra Nevada* hung on the second floor at the end of a long corridor in the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. This installation allowed for viewing from as far away as one hundred and fifty feet. At a distance of approximately thirty feet, the distant mountain peaks gain an appropriate sense of solidity; they distinguish themselves clearly from the nearby clouds, which soften into something more diffuse than their thick brushwork might otherwise allow. The brushwork is less prominent throughout, and so are the instances of duplication. In fact, one has the sense that they were the enabling factors in the resolution of the image at this distance; the indistinct brushwork appears sharp, and the repetitions led a sense of mass to each zone of the picture. Furthermore, the interlocking relays that sweep the eye across the surface of the picture do not wield as much influence. As a result, the composition settles into a clear recessionary procession from the foreground into the background. Finally yielding an illusion of depth, the picture plane transforms into a globular void of open space suspended above the lake and pinned in place by the framing cliffs and trees. Were it not for the immense distance between the viewer and the work, there might be little out of the ordinary in this picture, if considered in relation to the prevailing compositional conventions of landscape.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> A similar effect occurs when viewing *Yosemite* in the present-day galleries of the Denver Art Museum. The indistinct foreground boulder locks into focus, while the yellow-green brushwork diffuses into an autumnal glow. Across the river, the gestural flecks of white paint settle into the alluvium along the cliff's base. Even the heavy-handed boundary between the topography and the sky softens. Cliffs, sky, and valley

With this long view in mind, the significance of Bierstadt's brushwork and compositional methods shifts somewhat. Seen from up close, these elements operate in dialogue with the monumental size of the picture. But after observing how the composition coalesces at a distance, with the brushwork, repetitions, and relays all seeming to have played a contributing role, they signify differently. They announce themselves as a system of transmission, an instrument, so to speak, calibrated to produce, transmit, and deliver a pictorial message across a vast distance. Thus, the picture's enormous size reads as a means of ensuring the visibility of its contents when communicated to a remote vantage point.<sup>239</sup>

Considered together, the close and long views function dialectically. The clarity of the long-distance view suggests a successful delivery of a pictorial message, while the short view functions phatically, drawing attention to the channel of communication itself, to how the message was calibrated to reach a distant vantage point. What these two perspectives produce in synthesis is an awareness of how distance factors into the production of meaning. The animating drama of *Among the Sierra Nevada* is how it produces illusionistic depth and dimensionality only to those who look upon it from afar. It is a picture in which the clarity of its depicted contents—that is, the clarity of Western space—hinges on a successful act of long-distance communication.

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floor cohere to create an enclosure for a palpably three-dimensional void of open, sunlit air.

<sup>239</sup> One might reverse this dynamic, starting with the coherent long view, and, while walking forward, watch the composition fragment as the viewing distance shrinks.

Bierstadt's brushwork, compositional methods, as well as his choice of such a large canvas, thereby serve as tools for amplification, as a way of scaling up or enhancing an image to facilitate its transmission across distance. Jennifer Roberts and Martin Brückner have highlighted how size was a means by which colonial Americans navigated the challenges of communicating across vast continental or oceanic distances, with bigness—whether literally or rhetorically—serving as “the boost or amplification needed to convey impact over distance.”<sup>240</sup> In this reading, bigness was a means of overcoming or compensating for the difficult geographic realities of long-distance communication.<sup>241</sup> This is not to suggest that Bierstadt revived a colonial era rhetorical form in *Among the Sierra Nevada*, but to point to Roberts and Brückner's insights as a useful lens for thinking through how Bierstadt's viewing distances might have conveyed meanings specific to the artist's own time.

Indeed, there is a context within which this mode of long-distance transmission resonates, and it is not Clarence Cook's so-called mass audience. In the summer of 1868, when Bierstadt first unveiled *Among the Sierra Nevada* at the Langham Hotel in London, he displayed it for an exclusive class of elite British investors, a group of men whose cultural and professional status was tied to their ability to forge new channels

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<sup>240</sup> Roberts, *Transporting Visions: The Movement of Images in Early America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 106-107. Roberts cites in her discussion of bigness Martin Brückner, who identifies in the same period a stylistic “raising of voices” in colonial texts written for faraway receivers. For more on this point, see Brückner, *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 76.

<sup>241</sup> Roberts, in a discussion of Charles Wilson Peale's *The Exhumation of the Mastodon* (ca. 1806-7), proposes that size “compensates (in its own looming) for the vastness of the territory through which it must struggle to appear.” Roberts, *Transporting Visions*, 107.

of communication across vast distances. Considered in relation to the class interests of this group, particularly those of its most prominent member, the telegraph magnate Cyrus Field, the significance of *Among the Sierra Nevada's* long viewing distances—and their interaction with the too small gallery space—comes into clearer focus.

### **Bierstadt, Cyrus Field, and the Culture of Long-Distance Communication**

In the summer of 1868, Cyrus Field was perhaps the most famous industrialist all of North America and the United Kingdom. Two years prior, in August of 1866, he had overseen a successful effort to lay a transatlantic telegraph cable between Ireland and Newfoundland. A monumental undertaking, the project had taken eight years and four unsuccessful attempts to complete. Upon the delivery of the first message through the cable, an international celebration ensued. Banquets and receptions were held in Field's honor, and the press regaled him with laudatory coverage that likened his and his compatriots' achievements "to the crusades and the discovery of America."<sup>242</sup>

This spectacle and its accompanying rhetoric was in no small part of Field's own making. From his first attempts in the summer of 1858 to lay a transatlantic cable, Field and his partners had worked to emphasize the heroic nature of their endeavor. They published and commissioned articles, delivered speeches, and lobbied politicians with rhetoric that not only emphasized the ambition and magnitude of the project, but which also proclaimed that the cable marked a fundamental transformation in the nature of global communication, one that would solidify the commercial power of the

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<sup>242</sup> Karl Kusserow, *Picturing Power: Portraiture and Its Uses in the New York Chamber of Commerce* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 320.



United States and the United Kingdom on a global stage.<sup>243</sup> Through this rhetoric, Field and his compatriots cast themselves the catalyzing force driving a new era of global connectivity.<sup>244</sup>

A Eurocentric ideology of economic imperialism underpins this rhetoric. As Simone Müller states, building on the foundational scholarship of James Carey, “the buildup of the global communications system and its coordination and regulation were deeply entrenched in the logic of imperial power relations as well as Eurocentric notions of civilization.”<sup>245</sup> However, as Müller also emphasizes, the motivations of the actors involved in the production and maintenance of this global communicative system are not merely reducible to this imperial logic.<sup>246</sup> Such actors consciously instrumentalized the rhetoric of the telegraph to suit their own aims and ambitions, and

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<sup>243</sup> Simone Müller, “The Transatlantic Telegraphs and the *Class of 1866* – the Formative Years of Transnational Networks in Telegraphic Space, 1858-1884/89,” *Historical Social Research*, 35, no. 1 (2010): 253. In her studies of Field’s self-promotion, Müller has also pointed to the ways that the transatlantic telegraph popularized the Eurocentric ideology of global connectivity as an equalizing force for good in society. Idem., *Wiring the World: The Social and Cultural Creation of Global Telegraph Networks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>244</sup> For a summary of the laudatory visual and material cultures that accompanied this celebration of Field, see Josephine C. Dobkin, “The Laying of the Atlantic Cable: Paintings, Watercolors, and Commemorative Objects Given to the Metropolitan Museum by Cyrus W. Field,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 41 (2006): 155-170, 14-15.

<sup>245</sup> Müller, *Wiring the World*, 7. For more on the ways that telegraph magnates deployed cultural, economic, legal, and political means to “justify and make effective the development of a privately owned and controlled monopolistic” use of the telegraph, see James W. Carey, “Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph,” *Prospects* 8 (1983): 303-325.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 7.

they did so in ways that are indicative of varied “entanglements” of cultural, historical, social, and spatial factors that exist within (and give shape to) a seemingly monolithic discourse.<sup>247</sup>

In the case of Field and his industrialist and financier partners, the rhetoric of transatlantic connectivity offered a means of gatekeeping cultural and professional status. By molding public memory of the telegraph and its importance around a set of gender, class, and professional markers conducive to their professional self-interest, Field and his compatriots defined eligibility for membership into their elite social circle.<sup>248</sup> This eligibility held economic benefits, given that in the immediate aftermath of the cable’s completion, Field and his partners held a monopoly over its use. Field’s gatekeeping was also a means of securing and dispersing cultural authority.<sup>249</sup> As art historian Karl Kusserow notes, the New York Chamber of Commerce aggressively worked to court Field’s attention in an effort to create a popular association between their organization and his cable, even though their actual

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 8. Müller emphasizes that these “entanglements” include subject positions that harbor the potential to resist or work against the logic of Eurocentric imperialism, although Bierstadt or Field’s “entanglements” certainly should not be placed within this category.

<sup>248</sup> Müller, *Wiring the World*, 9.

<sup>249</sup> For useful introductions to how concepts of class, gender, and race have historically informed who gains access to elite financial markets, as well as how these markets in turn come to be perceived as legitimate, see Alex Preda, *Framing Finance: The Boundaries of Markets and Modern Capitalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Urs Staheli, *Spectacular Speculation: Thrills, the Economy, and Popular Discourse*, trans. Eric Savolth (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

involvement in the project had been minimal.<sup>250</sup> Seen in the context of these “entanglements,” Bierstadt’s manipulation of viewing distances emerges as an effort to instrumentalize the rhetoric surrounding the transatlantic telegraph to bolster his own status within this elite group.

Likewise, the long viewing distances in *Among the Sierra Nevada* may be understood as part of Bierstadt’s broader effort to align his own artistic achievements with the culture of transatlantic business that Field shaped. The first documented contact between the two men took place in New York in October of 1866, when they both attended a banquet at the esteemed Manhattan restaurant Delmonico’s.<sup>251</sup> The banquet marked the conclusion of a widely publicized visit to the United States by a delegation of British bondholders, all of whom shared a stake in the Atlantic and Great Western Railway, a recently completed line that connected New York City and Saint Louis.<sup>252</sup> Although built on American soil, the Atlantic and Great Western had been a

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<sup>250</sup> Karl Kusserow, “Technology and Ideology in Daniel Huntington’s Atlantic Cable Projectors,” *American Art* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 96.

<sup>251</sup> Delmonico’s was a key site for ostentatious “rituals of bourgeois self-identification” among New York’s ascendant post-Civil War elite. Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 156 and 246-247.

<sup>252</sup> The delegation first visited Meadville, Pennsylvania, then Dayton, Cincinnati, and Saint Louis. After reaching the terminus of the main line, they followed a branch line up to Chicago before returning to the East Coast. Their route can be pieced together from the extensive press coverage that the delegation received in New York City. “The English Tourists,” *The New York Daily Tribune*, September 20, 1865; “The English Tourists,” *The New York Daily Tribune*, September 21, 1865; “The English Tourists,” *The New York Daily Tribune*, October 3, 1865; “The English Capitalists,” *The New York Daily Tribune*, October 26, 1865.

predominantly British creation.<sup>253</sup> Investors in London had financed the railway, hoping to profit from future shipping revenues, particularly the rates charged to those who shipped gold bullion overland from the Rocky Mountains to ports in New York. Both the delegation's tour of the United States and the concluding Delmonico's banquet were meant as a celebration of those who had funded the project. Toasts and speeches credited British bankers, industrialists, and politicians for enabling the line, going so far as to credit the British businessmen for ushering in a new period of economic collaboration between the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>254</sup>

When discussing Bierstadt's presence at the banquet, scholars typically point not to Field, but to two of the guests of honor: James McHenry, a British financier who had issued more than £3,000,000 in Atlantic and Great Western bonds in England—a sum that funded nearly the entirety of the project—and Thomas Kennard, a British railway engineer who served as a construction consultant.<sup>255</sup> Shortly after the

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<sup>253</sup> For a history of the line, see William Reynolds, *European Capital, British Iron, and an American Dream: The Story of the Atlantic and Great Western Railroad*, eds. Peter K. Gifford and Robert D. Ilisevich (Akron, Ohio: The University of Akron Press, 2002).

<sup>254</sup> Offered shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War, such remarks elided decades of English investment and support of the Southern cotton trade. On English investment in Southern cotton, see Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), 98-199 and Andrew J. Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 188-191.

<sup>255</sup> Gerald Carr, "Albert Bierstadt, Big Trees, and the British: A Log of Many Anglo American Ties," *Arts Magazine* 50 (1986), 61-62; Kevin Murphy, "Economics of Style: The Business Practices of American Artists and the Structure of the Market, 1850-1910" (PhD diss. University of California, Santa Barbara, 2005), 83. In addition to Carr and Murphy's works, additional biographical information on McHenry appears in "Obituary, James McHenry," *The New York Times*, May 27, 1891, 4. A brief

banquet, Bierstadt sold *Lander's Peak* to McHenry for the then record price of \$25,000. A few months later, Kennard bought *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* for \$20,000.<sup>256</sup> Art historian Kevin Murphy has proposed that Bierstadt's reputation as a frontier artist motivated these purchases, with his paintings' imagery of territorial exploration and expansion serving as visual corollaries to the two financiers' self-styled visions of their role in society.<sup>257</sup> This hypothesis is plausible; however, it accounts only for the patrons' interest in Bierstadt, not the artist's interest in his patrons. Furthermore, while the western subject matter of *Lander's Peak* may have resonated for McHenry, such a reading offers only a partial account of how Bierstadt's paintings may have appealed to the self-aggrandizement specific to members of this transatlantic-minded class.

The financiers of the Atlantic and Great Western saw themselves as the connective tissue that linked two continents together. At Delmonico's, Bierstadt listened as Edward Watkin, a Manchester-based Member of Parliament well-known in Britain for his interest in transnational telegraph and postal networks, toasted Field's cable. Watkin proclaimed that it would establish new "bonds of indissoluble

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biography of Kennard can be found in Daniel E. Russell, "Thomas William Kennard and the Steam Yacht Octavia," GlenCoveHeritage.com. [http://www.glencoveheritage.com/legacy\\_site/kennard.pdf](http://www.glencoveheritage.com/legacy_site/kennard.pdf), last accessed June 21, 2018.

<sup>256</sup> Anderson and Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt*, 181. For context on these prices, the average price for an American landscape painting during the 1860s was \$563. Murphy, "Economics of Style," 83.

<sup>257</sup> Murphy, "Economics of Style," 156-57.

communication and union” across the Atlantic.<sup>258</sup> Field himself joined in the festivities, rising to toast those who had financed the Atlantic and Great Western.<sup>259</sup> His remarks echoed those of American boosters and the press, who characterized the railway’s British backers as the driving force of American economic growth.<sup>260</sup> Likewise, during the delegation’s tour of the Atlantic and Great Western’s lines, *The New York Daily Tribune* had likened British capital investment to the wooden ties that supported iron rails. “English designs and English capital,” the paper proclaimed, “constitute the missing link in the great overland chain of broad gauge.”<sup>261</sup>

Toasts and speeches at the banquet also touted those who might go on to forge additional financial and infrastructural connections between the American West and

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<sup>258</sup> For more on Watkin’s interest in transatlantic and transcontinental communication projects, see “Mr. E. W. Watkin, M. P. For Stockport,” *Illustrated London News*, July 23, 1864, 93 and Eleanor Jones Harvey, *The Voyage of The Icebergs: Frederic Church’s Artistic Masterpiece* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, in association with the Dallas Museum of Art, 2002), 69.

<sup>259</sup> Farewell Banquet,” *The New York Times*, October 31, 1865, 1.

<sup>260</sup> Ohio Senator John Sherman characterized the United States as a nation dependent on foreign credit. “We have a vast country,” he proclaimed, “but with undeveloped resources. We want all the help you can give us. We can use profitably to ourselves and to you all the surplus capital . . . of Europe.” *Ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> “The English Tourists,” *The New York Daily Tribune*, September 15, 1865, 8. Notably, the concept of an “overland chain,”—which implies the secure fastening of western space to Northeastern interests—appears with some regularity in period descriptions of the Transcontinental Railroad. See for example, Robert E. Draper, “The Central Pacific Railroad,” *Sacramento City and County Directory for 1868*, *idem.*, ed. (Sacramento: H.S. Crocker & Co., 1868), 63, which writes of the “the links of the great overland chain that will connect the Pacific with the Atlantic, and bind more closely together the interests, affections and sympathies of the people residing on both sides of the continent.”

the United Kingdom. Minister of Parliament Sir Morton Peto rose to proclaim to the group that the American West should be their next arena for investment. “Although we have seen something like nine thousand miles of your railways,” he quipped, “our investigations have not extended to the . . . great West.”<sup>262</sup> “We return to England,” he concluded,” with the conviction that the more the country is investigated, the more it will repay investigation.”<sup>263</sup> With these remarks, Peto reminded the audience that full communicative and financial connectivity with western space had yet to be achieved, and that the West was calling out to them for a more fulsome relationship.

British investment interest in the West was a recurring theme at social events organized around this group. In July of 1868, Bierstadt attended a London banquet honoring Cyrus Field.<sup>264</sup> Much like the Delmonico’s banquet, this dinner, held at Willis’ Rooms, the site of the Almack’s social club, celebrated Field for his achievements in bringing previously remote spaces into communicative contact with

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<sup>262</sup> Farewell Banquet,” October 31, 1865. Peto’s interest in transatlantic finance extended to tax and export law. In 1866, he published a manual on navigating customs and tariffs for English investors looking to profit on the transatlantic import market. Sir. Samuel Morton Peto, *Taxation: Its Levy and Expenditure, Past and Future; Being and Enquiry into our Financial Policy* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866).

<sup>263</sup> Farewell Banquet,” October. 31, 1865. Watkin shared Peto’s interest in American Western mines. In 1852, he published a report describing prospects for British investment in the American West and concluded that the “mineral resources of the country are enormous.” Watkin, *A Trip to the United States and Canada: In a Series of Letters* (London: W. H. Smith and Son, 1852), 57.

<sup>264</sup> “Banquet to Mr. Cyrus W. Field,” *The Morning Post* (London, UK), July 2, 1868, 6. These were not the only two events during this period that Bierstadt and Field were in contact. In November of 1866, Bierstadt served on the welcoming committee for a Century Club reception for Field. “The Century Club Reception of Cyrus W. Field,” *The Evening Post (New York)*, November 19, 1866, 1.

London. To reinforce this, a telegraph receiver was set up in the banquet hall and messages from North America were sent, received, and read aloud throughout the dinner, including a telegram from the Canadian Governor of Victoria proclaiming that the expansion of telegraph networks had improved oversight and control over English-owned mines in the Canadian West.<sup>265</sup> These rituals of transmission bolstered Field's identity as the creator of the connective link that allowed the state to profit from far-flung locales. Both the Delmonico's and Willis' Rooms banquets commemorated not those who had explored the West, but those who had integrated it more fully into networks of shipping and finance.

The long viewing distances of *Among the Serra Nevada* seem meaningful in this regard. *Among the Sierra Nevada* may depict western space, but it is fundamentally about the geographic distance that separates western space from other regions. Hanging in the Langham Hotel in London, calling out to faraway viewers, the picture materializes the broader networks of communication of which it forms a part; it is at once an analogy for and a representation of these elite financial networks. As such, the picture decouples the ability to perceive its contents from a narrative of overland travel in a manner that resonates within the context of the communicative transformations wrought by the telegraph. As James Carey emphasizes, the telegraph "permitted for the first time the effective separation of communication from transportation," allowing messages to travel nearly instantaneously across distances that would take people or commercial goods weeks to travel.<sup>266</sup> Providing a fantasy of

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<sup>265</sup> "Banquet to Mr. Cyrus W. Field," July 2, 1868.

<sup>266</sup> Carey, "Technology and Ideology," 305.



contact at a distance, *Among the Sierra Nevada* offers up a similar dynamic for viewers.

However, such a reading leaves out a troublesome aspect of the Langham Hotel exhibition, one that has so far managed to elude analysis: the fact that the gallery space was too small for long-distance viewing. As the *Art Journal* critic discussed earlier pointed out, the cramped exhibition space subverted the prized affordance of clear long-distance communication.<sup>267</sup> As the picture announces itself as a vehicle for long-distance transmission, the gallery space ensures that the delivery of this message does not occur. The long distance view was not accessible to gallery goers; instead; as the critic indicated, they were forced to project an image of the picture's full realization to an ideal vantage point beyond the confines of the gallery space. What then, might we make of the noise, so to speak, that the too-small gallery space introduces into Bierstadt's pictorial signal?

There are two ways of addressing the issue, both of which treat the too-small gallery space of the Langham Hotel as an active agent in the production of meaning, as opposed to an unwelcome inconvenience. First, the tension between the painting's semiosis and the material circumstances of the gallery create a scenario in which the picture calls out for a contact that has not yet been made. Put another way, *Among the Sierra Nevada* announces that western space is dependent on a successful act of long-distance communication for its full realization, while simultaneously declaring that this connection has yet to take place. Read in this way, the Langham Hotel display of *Among the Sierra Nevada* might read analogously with the future-oriented rhetoric

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<sup>267</sup> "Great Pictures by an American Artist," 159-160.

that surrounded calls for further transatlantic investment in the West, such as Peto's announcement that "our investigations have not extended to the . . . great West."<sup>268</sup> Short-circuited by its display context, *Among the Serra Nevada* signaled that a fulsome connection between the Sierras and those in London still needed to be enacted, functioning as a call to action to those financiers who would have been present during the picture's unveiling.

Second, the too-small gallery space intensifies semiotic affinities between Bierstadt's brushwork and telegraphic communication. In his study of realist fiction in the mid nineteenth century, Richard Menke argues that "new media and information systems offered inspiration for how the world might register in prose." An attention to how human thought was transmitted through electrical communication, he continues, inspired "new considerations of what consciousness might look outside the human mind and in prose."<sup>269</sup> Such considerations entailed a grappling with the materiality of information—how it might be packaged, stored, and transmitted in various media, whether technological or artistic.<sup>270</sup>

Menke's analysis offers a potential framework for coming to terms with the semiotic impact of the Langham Hotel's too-small gallery space. As previously discussed, when examined from a short viewing distance, the brushwork of *Among the*

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<sup>268</sup> Farewell Banquet," October 31, 1865.

<sup>269</sup> Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (Sanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 6-7.

<sup>270</sup> My insights into a potential correspondence between Bierstadt's style and telegraphy also draws from Jennifer Robert's discussion of this intermedial connection in the paintings of Asher Durand. Roberts, *Transporting Visions*, 117-160.

*Sierra Nevada* breaks down into a record of its own making. Painterly traces register the schematic, simplified gestures that Bierstadt relied on to produce an image whose contents would be most clearly discernable when perceived from afar. When seen from up close, Bierstadt's brushwork emphasizes the material structure of the schematic visual language that translated western space for transmission across a great distance. A limited architectural surround would heighten an awareness of the picture's phatic dimension, foregrounding the unique technological structure of the pictorial message, so to speak, as opposed to its contents.

Notably, it was not uncommon for depictions of western space from this period to foreground signs of process in order to signal an erudite mode of viewing. Robin Kelsey, discussing Timothy H. O'Sullivan's 1871 photographs from the Wheeler Survey, has pointed to how nineteenth-century survey imagery often materializes "the practical and productive process of translating the West to the page."<sup>271</sup> Kelsey argues that this reflexivity was calculated to justify the legitimacy of geological surveys by asserting a distinction between the pictures that they produced and scenic views made for the enjoyment of the tourist or sightseer. In this reading, the reflexive component of American Western survey imagery signals the specialized intellectual work involved in survey image-making, and by extension, the alignment of an image with a particular social space of knowledge production.<sup>272</sup> The conspicuous brushwork of

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<sup>271</sup> Robin Kelsey, *Archive Style: Photographs & Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 95.

<sup>272</sup> The crux of Kelsey's argument hinges on the fact that the aesthetic parameters of this graphic mode were ill-defined, meaning that image-makers had a degree of personal freedom in crafting their survey pictures. As Kelsey highlights, certain figures, such as O'Sullivan, exploited this freedom, crafting images that spoke to

*Among the Sierra Nevada* should be read similarly, although it should be noted that, as discussed in the following chapter, Bierstadt's landscapes exhibit a tenuous, even adversarial, relationship to western survey imagery, particularly its cartographic representations.

To elaborate on this point: a pictorial emphasis on phatic communication would have been anathema to period art critics such as Cook, who argued for pictures that reenacted the circumstances of an unmediated encounter with nature. But an attentiveness to the mediating function of language would have been in keeping with the interests of a financier class whose fortunes depended on the dematerialization of western space into parcels of transmissible code. In this context, Field's prominence at both the Delmonico's and Willis' Rooms events is noteworthy; Bierstadt unveiled *Among the Sierra Nevada* at a time and place in which the transmissive properties of the telegraphic messages were an object of attention and celebration among his desired patron class. By intensifying the communicative logic of his paint-handling, the too-small hotel space underscored the fact that the artist's depictions of western space engaged with a specific culture of technological communication, as opposed to a more prosaic visual rhetoric of scenic beauty.

Notably, Bierstadt worked to ensure that he was seen by this financier class as a specifically transatlantic figure, rather than a provincially western one. A week after the dinner at Willis' Rooms, while *Among the Sierra Nevada* was still on display at

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issues of identity and self-definition that were not limited to the core objectives of the survey.

the Langham Hotel, Bierstadt organized a banquet of his own.<sup>273</sup> Held at the hotel on July 9, the banquet honored the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who was then in the midst of a widely publicized tour of Europe.<sup>274</sup> If Bierstadt was looking to identify himself with a transatlantic community, Longfellow offered an ideal honoree. The poet's reputation hinged in no small part on his transatlantic popularity. He garnered acclaim United States not just for his poetry, but for his efforts to integrate European literature into American culture through the publication of anthologies and translations.<sup>275</sup> Conversely, Longfellow's works were in wide circulation in the United Kingdom, where they emerged as a discursive forum wherein English critics reflected on the nature of their cultural and political relationships to the

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<sup>273</sup> Circumstantial evidence suggests that *Among the Sierra Nevada* was on view during the event, either in the hall itself or in his studio in the Hotel. At the very least, given the timing of the dinner—less than three weeks before the *Art Journal* critic published his review lamenting the smallness of the exhibition space—the painting was somewhere in the building. William Truettner, untitled typescript, Box 1, Folder 1, Smithsonian American Art Museum Library, Vertical Files, "Bierstadt."

<sup>274</sup> Unfortunately, photographs or illustrations of the banquet do not survive, leaving only written descriptions in period newspapers. "Summary of This Morning's News," *The Pall Mall Gazette* (London, UK) July 10, 1868; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* (London, UK) July 12, 1868; "Mr. Longfellow," *The Times* (London, UK) July 11, 1868; "Summary of Passing Events," *The Brecon County Times* (UK) July 18, 1868; "Correspondence," *The Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald* (UK), July 14, 1868. For a detailed itinerary of Longfellow's 1868 trip, see John Morton, "Longfellow, Tennyson, and Transatlantic Celebrity," *Critical Survey* 27:3 (2015): 17-20.

<sup>275</sup> Through translations and published anthologies, he integrated European texts into American educational curriculums. Leslie Elizabeth Eckel, *Atlantic Citizens: Nineteenth-Century American Writers at Work in the World* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 22-23.

United States.<sup>276</sup> With his work bringing European literature to the United States, combined with the popularity of his poetry in the United Kingdom, Longfellow was seen during his lifetime as a transnational figure, someone whose fame stemmed in his ability to forge reciprocal cultural connections across the Atlantic.

During the banquet, Bierstadt underscored this particular aspect of Longfellow's literary identity. Bierstadt sat at the head table alongside the poet, where they were joined by Field, creating a triumvirate representative of American-British connections.<sup>277</sup> Near the conclusion of the evening, Bierstadt rose from his seat to gift Longfellow a small painting. According to the *Morning Post*, the picture was intended to show "how deeply [Bierstadt] had imbibed himself with the compositions of the latter."<sup>278</sup>

Titled *The Departure of Hiawatha* (fig. 3.24), the picture portrays the closing scene from Longfellow's epic poem, *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855). In this scene, a birch canoe containing a Christian missionary arrives at the Ojibwe warrior Hiawatha's village. Welcoming the missionary, Hiawatha decides to leave his tribe and convert to Christianity. Bierstadt portrays the moment following Hiawatha's departure, when a crowd of Ojibwe onlookers gathers to watch Hiawatha's canoe

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<sup>276</sup> Kate Flint, "Is the Native an American? National Identity and the English Reception of *Hiawatha*," in *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*, ed. Meredith L. McGill (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 73-74.

<sup>277</sup> The grouping did not go unnoticed. One journalist commented on the blending of art and industry exemplified by the illustrious group. Untitled and undated newspaper clipping (ca. 1868), Bierstadt Family Scrapbook, The Brooklyn Museum Library Special Collections, 11.

<sup>278</sup> "Dinner to Professor Longfellow," 6.

recede into the distance. With its assimilationist narrative, this scene from Longfellow's poem is often linked—rightly—to the concept of the Vanishing Race, a rhetorical construction that worked to naturalize the forced dispossession of Native peoples and their land in North America.<sup>279</sup> Presented by Bierstadt within the context of the banquet, it may have harbored an additional layer of significance.

In *The Departure of Hiawatha*, Bierstadt grouped Hiawatha's onlookers in the lower left corner of the foreground. Clustered together, they produce a strong orthogonal that extends from the foreground toward the distant horizon. The leading figure even points out across the water, as if to emphasize the importance of the relationship between foreground and background. Through this composition, *The Departure of Hiawatha* calls attention to the spatial connection that enabled the transformative encounter between the white missionary and Hiawatha. In such a reading, Bierstadt portrays the product of a successful act of long-distance communication (successful in terms of Eurocentric ideologies of cultural imperialism).

Seen in this light, the recessionary thrust of the figural grouping offers a provocative echo of the compositions of Robert Charles Dudley, a British painter who was commissioned by Field to produce a series of works portraying the laying of the transatlantic cable. In his depictions of the cable-laying, Dudley often grouped human figures in ways that spoke symbolically to the transmission of messages across the ocean. *Landing the Shore End of the Atlantic Cable* (fig. 3.25), for instance, depicts a group of laborers as they drag the last few feet of cable out of the ocean and onto the

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<sup>279</sup> Cynthia D. Nickerson, "Artistic Interpretations of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, 1855-1900," *The American Art Journal* 16, no. 3 (Summer, 1984): 49-77.

shore. Arranged in a line pointing toward the horizon, their bodies function as a surrogate presence for the underwater cable that runs out and across the horizon. Pointing out across the water, then, the figures in *The Departure of Hiawatha* link Longfellow and his poem to a cultural vision of influence enacted across distance. What Bierstadt had “imbibed himself with” from Longfellow was the poet’s understanding of the importance of forging connections across a distance.

### Conclusion

If pictures such as *Among the Sierra Nevada* and *The Departure of Hiawatha* worked in service of Bierstadt’s attempted self-fashioning as a transatlantic businessman, they appear to have succeeded—at least during the artist’s lifetime. Just as the artist worked to establish affinities between his artistic commitments and the professional identities of transatlantic investors, certain transatlantic businessmen came to associate their business practices with Bierstadt.

On October 13, 1875, a commercial sailing ship named *Bierstadt* (fig. 3.26) was launched from a shipyard in Wiscasset, Maine.<sup>280</sup> Commissioned in 1873, the ship was built for William H. Harrison, a Massachusetts shipping merchant who owned a vineyard in Sonoma County, California.<sup>281</sup> Harrison envisioned using the ship for the

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<sup>280</sup> “The Bark ‘Bierstadt,’” unidentified newspaper clipping dated Nov. 2, 1875 in Bierstadt Family Scrapbook, *Bierstadt Collection, 1863-1957*, Brooklyn Museum Library Special Collections.

<sup>281</sup> William Armstrong Fairburn, *Merchant Sail: United States Wood Shipbuilders and Shipbuilding Centers during the Days of the Young Republic and Throughout the Nineteenth Century, with the Production of Sailing Vessels, Including Packets, Clippers, and Down Easters*, Vol. 5 (Center Lovell, Maine: Fairburn Marine Educational Foundation, 1955), 3343, 3348.



Atlantic portion of California coastal trade: the *Bierstadt* would carry to Europe goods that had been transported overland from California to ports in south Texas and New Orleans.<sup>282</sup> Shipping ledgers indicate that by February of 1876, Harrison was already using the *Bierstadt* to ship goods from the Gulf of Mexico to Amsterdam.<sup>283</sup> The *Bierstadt's* career was short lived, however. Eleven months later, the ship ran aground in East London and was irreparably damaged. Nonetheless, the *Bierstadt's* brief role traces the contours of a transatlantic shipping network, linking together the fledgling California wine industry, the Texas cotton industry, and European businessmen.<sup>284</sup> That Harrison would name a ship working in this context after Bierstadt suggest the degree to which the painter had managed to associate himself with transatlantic commerce.

Following the Langham Hotel exhibition and his tour of London, Bierstadt would do more than draw visual analogies between his practice as a painter and an elite culture of finance. During the early 1870s, he would take on the role of a long-distance investor. Living in New York, he pumped thousands of dollars into a remote silver mine in the shadow of the Sierras—a mine so remote that he himself had never seen it—all while seeking to draw friends in London into his scheme. His experiences as a mining speculator would inform the production of *Mount Corcoran*, a picture that

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<sup>282</sup> For a discussion of the early years of the California coastal trade, see Steven Stool, *The Fruits of Natural Advantage: Making the Industrial Countryside in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>283</sup> “Shipping News,” *The Commercial and Financial Chronicle* (London, UK), February 19, 1876, 188.

<sup>284</sup> “Mercantile Ship News,” *The Standard* (London, UK), March 7, 1877, 6.

marks the culmination of Bierstadt's shared semiotics of landscape painting and speculative finance.

## Chapter 4

### ***MOUNT CORCORAN AND THE SOCIAL LIFE OF MINING SPECULATION***

As the title suggests, Albert Bierstadt's landscape *Mount Corcoran* (fig. 4.1) is a picture of an actual, identifiable mountain. Specifically, it depicts Mount Corcoran, a Sierra Nevada peak that overlooks Owens Valley in Eastern California. Bierstadt, following his customary approach, has rendered Mount Corcoran in isolation, separating it from the tight cluster of peaks that surround it in reality. Low clouds cloak most of the terrain in impenetrable shadow, save for its uppermost reaches and a single glistening waterfall, exposed during a momentary break in the cloud cover. Like *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie* (fig. 4.2), this scene is about the inscrutability of mountain terrain, of the challenge of discerning anything more than a fragmentary glimpse of what might lie hidden out of sight. Distance is also an operative theme: a mountain lake pools in the middle ground, its shoreline pointing from the viewer's implied vantage point in the foreground toward the opposite shore. Like *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (fig. 4.3), *Mount Corcoran* dramatizes looking across a distance. Considered in relation to what I have discussed so far, this seems a familiar picture.

Complications emerge, however, upon turning to the picture's relationship to its depicted subject. *Mount Corcoran* is peculiar in that Bierstadt chose its subject retroactively. He finished the painting before deciding what it represented. At some point in 1876, Bierstadt completed the painting now known as *Mount Corcoran*. Soon after, he sent it to the National Academy of Design, where he exhibited it under a different title: *Mountain Lake*. Bearing this generic title, the picture did not claim a real place as its subject. Following the exhibition, however, Bierstadt decided to

change the name of the work. *Mountain Lake* became *Mount Corcoran*. Upon making this change, he declared that *Mount Corcoran* portrayed a specific peak in the Sierras.<sup>285</sup> Notably, he made no alterations to the picture itself that would bolster its newfound identity as a depiction of a real place.<sup>286</sup>

Compounding matters, the real Mount Corcoran did not exist when Bierstadt completed his painting. Or rather, the peak did not yet have this name. It was one of a number of anonymous peaks in the High Sierras near Mount Whitney. But this changed in 1877, when, after retitling *Mountain Lake*, Bierstadt went to the War Department, where he asked an official to name a mountain in the Sierras after his painting. The official complied. Mount Corcoran now rose above Owens Valley.<sup>287</sup> The real mountain was, in a sense, created in the image of his painting—a reversal of the expected picture-subject dynamic. And what secured the connection between the two peaks was an act of naming, not an act of naturalistic depiction.

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<sup>285</sup> Sarah Cash, “Mount Corcoran,” *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. idem. (Manchester, VT.: Hudson Hills Press, in association with the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 2012), 140-141.

<sup>286</sup> Following the completion of the work, Bierstadt did make slight alterations to the clouds in the sky, at the request of William McLeod, the curator of the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Ibid., 141.

<sup>287</sup> To reflect historical usage, I use “Mount Corcoran” to refer to the peak that Bierstadt claimed was the subject of his painting. However, this is no longer the peak’s name. In 1968, the United States Board of Geographic Names designated the peak “Mount Langley” in an effort to rectify inconsistencies in area maps. When the board made this change, it reassigned the name “Mount Corcoran” to a peak just to the north. Any usage of “Mount Corcoran” in this study should be understood as referring to Mount Langley, not present-day Mount Corcoran. On early disputes about the name of Mount Corcoran/Langley, see Francis P. Farquhar, *History of the Sierra Nevada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 186.

When considering *Mount Corcoran*, scholars tend to focus on patronage. As the picture's title may suggest, Bierstadt renamed his painting in an effort to sell the work to the Washington, D.C. banker William Corcoran, in the hopes that the patron would hang the work in his esteemed Corcoran Gallery of Art. Bierstadt succeeded. Corcoran bought the work and soon after it went on view at his Washington gallery.<sup>288</sup> The circumstances leading up to the sale are well-documented, thanks to the careful research of art historians Nancy Anderson, Sarah Cash, and Linda Ferber.<sup>289</sup> Scholars often cite the naming of the real mountain as an example of Bierstadt's brazen—some would say shameless—methods of courting patrons and marketing his paintings. For example, Gordon Hendricks disparaged the renaming as mere “public relations tricks” and dismissed it as a byproduct of a crass commercialism that supposedly tarnished the artist's midcareer and late works.<sup>290</sup>

This story of patronage is compelling in that it shows how Bierstadt worked to shape his artistic legacy by depositing his paintings in prominent national museums.<sup>291</sup> But while Corcoran's involvement is certainly worthy of discussion in that particular

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<sup>288</sup> For an overview of William Corcoran's role as an art patron, see Alan Wallach, “William Wilson Corcoran's Failed National Gallery,” *Exhibiting Contradiction: Essays on the Art Museum in the United States*, ed. idem. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 22-37.

<sup>289</sup> Nancy K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art and Enterprise* (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1990), 54-55; Sarah Cash, “Mount Corcoran,” 140-141.

<sup>290</sup> Gordon Hendricks, *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of the American West* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1974), 233.

<sup>291</sup> Anderson & Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt*, 48-53.

context, a focus on patronage ultimately does not illuminate the representational stakes that underly *Mount Corcoran*'s relationship to its subject matter. Nor does an analysis focused on Bierstadt's commercial practices, if such an account remains beholden to a qualitative binary opposition between art made in service of higher ideals and art made in service of the art market. The full complexity of Bierstadt's decision to rename *Mountain* is lost if it is explained away merely as duplicitous marketing. If Bierstadt chose the landscape's subject only after the fact, without changing the substance of the painting, then what is the relationship between the material means of the picture, the accumulated brushstrokes on canvas, and the place that it reportedly depicts?

In this chapter, I examine the renaming of *Mount Corcoran* through a different lens. Specifically, I consider an aspect of Bierstadt's life previously unknown to scholars. Between 1872 and 1873, during a multiyear stay in San Francisco, Bierstadt made four trips to Owens Valley in Eastern California. There, not far from the peak that he would soon name Mount Corcoran, he became involved in a silver mining scheme in the nearby Inyo Mountains—the same scheme mentioned in the introduction to this study. Over the next decade, working in collaboration with local Army officers, Bierstadt attempted to secure the rights to potentially lucrative mining properties in unmapped, unexplored parts of the Inyos. In short, he tried to claim mining land sight unseen. He acquired space first, and learned what it contained second.

In *Mountain Lake*, Bierstadt set out to create a picture whose subject could be claimed through the mechanisms of the land market rather than through established conventions of naturalism. The picture functioned for artist and patron as unclaimed land—as a speculative asset whose meaning and value could be secured only upon its

transformation into private property. Underpinning this assumption is the idea that the value of land need not stem from its immutable material qualities, but from the social relationships and information networks that enabled its circulation as exchangeable property.

What follows is a chronological examination of Bierstadt's Owens Valley land deals from their inception to their implementation. This is a chapter largely about context. It details Bierstadt's travels in Owens Valley, his engagement with regional economic and imperialistic forces, and his relation to state-sponsored forms of knowledge production, particularly the California State Geological Survey. This material reveals not just how Bierstadt came to encounter Owens Valley—then a rarely discussed backwater in the young state—but how he came to imagine and value western space as both artist and speculator.

Bierstadt is too often conceived of as an artist-explorer, someone who bore firsthand witness to a frontier West on the cusp of development. Bierstadt's Inyo land deals tell a different story. They offer a reminder how Bierstadt's experience of the West was mediated by others, that he had it described and represented to him by individuals who participated in professional networks of real estate speculation. Bierstadt contemplated Inyo mines from afar, either from the opposite side of a rugged, difficult-to-traverse mountain range, or from a continent away, receiving investment tips in the form of letters and map tracings. Firsthand observation played a minimal role in how he decided to value the region as a site of economic development.

This fact offers a lens through which to consider Bierstadt's willingness to retroactively change the subject of one of his paintings. Thanks to his involvement in professional networks of speculation, Bierstadt understood that in matters of real

estate, land had to be claimable before it could be legible. Land needed to be rendered exchangeable and transmissible as a commodity before it could take on meaning and value. He applied this insight to the production of *Mountain Lake* and its subsequent sale as *Mount Corcoran*. Bierstadt painted claimable space, space whose meaning and value originated at the moment of its exchange as a commodity good. And to cap off this endeavor, he laid claim to a real mountain, naming it for his patron.

In this respect, the renaming of Mount Corcoran is emblematic of the mechanisms by which western public lands became commodities during the nineteenth century. During the 1860s and 1870s, Congress devised new legal and bureaucratic frameworks to administer the dispensation of expropriated indigenous lands to private buyers. Designed to facilitate the construction of national networks of transportation and communication, these frameworks often had the consequence of codifying the speculative acquisition of western lands by a small handful of well-connected elites.<sup>292</sup> As Patricia Nelson Limerick puts it, one's ability to profit from the exchange value of privatized land hinged in no small part on one's ability to manipulate "the legal principles set up to convey and protect property."<sup>293</sup> In other words, exchange value was a function of access. Western land dispensation bore only

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<sup>292</sup> For an overview of how this codifying took place within the context of federal land grants to railroads, see Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 93-133.

<sup>293</sup> "To the beneficiary, accumulating profit, it was just another legitimate reward for getting there first—for having the nerve, the enterprise, and the instinct to acquire title at the right time." Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 67.



the veneer of a democratic process.<sup>294</sup> The succession of land acts that privatized public land during the 1860s and 1870s, such as the Homestead Act, the Pacific Railroad Act, and the Mining Act, were subject to regulatory capture by monopolistic enterprises such as railroads, and they regularly facilitated the forms of speculation they ostensibly curtailed, as elite speculators leveraged their access to the government bureaucracies that mapped, parceled, and distributed western public lands.<sup>295</sup>

Bierstadt may not have acquired Mount Corcoran as his physical property, *per se*; but the move was nonetheless rooted in a desire to boost the exchange value of land—in this instance a painted depiction of land. (What is also notable about the move is that it suggests Bierstadt’s awareness of the importance of securing ownership of land’s signifying potential, of profiting from its value as an image.)<sup>296</sup> In this sense, the painter’s ability to convince a government official to name a real mountain on his behalf exemplifies the rewards granted to well-connected individuals in western land matters. Thus, *Mount Corcoran* is imbricated in a period impulse toward the elite privatization of western space, one that would eventually provoke widespread anti-

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<sup>294</sup> As Limerick notes in a characteristic example, jobs at the General Land Office, the bureaucracy charged with legitimizing land claims across the United States, became highly desirable in that they guaranteed privileged access to information about potentially lucrative properties. *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>295</sup> For a detailed discussion of successive congressional efforts to privatize public land in the American West, see Richard White, “*It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own*,” *A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 137-153.

<sup>296</sup> For more on the commodification of images as opposed to goods, see Paul Wood, “Commodity,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed., eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 387.

monopolistic reform movements as the century came to a close.<sup>297</sup> If Bierstadt's paintings are wedded to a historical memory of American Western expansion, his pictures should be understood as part of effort to wring private gain from a public good.

### **Lode Mining and the Owens Valley Genocide**

To understand the relationship between *Mount Corcoran* and its titular subject, it is helpful to first consider the cultural and economic identity of Owens Valley during the 1870s. When Bierstadt selected a peak overlooking the valley as the new subject for his painting, the area had recently drawn the attention of regional, national, and international mining investors as a promising site for mining speculation. Due to a constellation of geological and colonial factors, all of which culminated in the violent expropriation of indigenous lands by vigilante prospectors during the mid-1860s, the valley and its flanking mountains seemed poised for a silver mining boom. The burgeoning of the local mining industry in the wake of expropriation spurred a process

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<sup>297</sup> During the late 1860s and early 1870s, the profits heaped on insiders fueled a growing anti-monopoly reform movement, fronted prominently by Henry George, a young journalist who, in the late 1860s in San Francisco, began advocating for a novel land tax system that would tie the commodity value of land exclusively to its use value as a natural and residential resource. Although the history of anti-speculation reform movements falls outside the bounds of this study (in part because it postdates the period in question, and in part because Bierstadt left no record of his thoughts on monopolies or efforts to curtail speculation), a thorough discussion of the topic appears in Edward T. O'Donnell, *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), especially 33-68. See also Richard White, *The Republic for which it Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), 555-578.

of privatization, as speculators—including Bierstadt—rushed to locate and secure titles to newly available mining lands. The renamed *Mount Corcoran* should thus be understood as a portrayal of recently conquered space, space whose meaning and value stemmed primarily from its newly established status as claimable real estate.

The conditions that enabled the privatization of Owens Valley originated in the distant past, far beneath the Sierras. This is not to imply that the capitalistic exploitation of Owens Valley was in any sense predetermined, a natural and inevitable outgrowth of the region's geological history; rather, the deep time of geology underscores the agency of the land itself in informing how speculators like Bierstadt came to imagine and encounter the valley in the mid-nineteenth century.

To understand this agency, one must step back some 3.5 to 10 million years. At that point, the bottom of the vast granite batholith that forms the Sierra Nevada mountains broke off. Miles beneath the surface of the earth, a dense, garnet-rich “root” of granite detached itself from the crust and sunk into the mantle. Like a balloon, the newly lightened batholith rose upward, provoking a sustained period of mountain uplift that continues today. Simultaneously, the thinning of the batholith weakened the Sierras' hold on the North American continent. The slow drift of tectonic plates crushed against the mountains from both east and west, causing the newly unmoored Sierras to slip northward relative to North America. As the Sierras rose and ground their way north along a series of faults, the topography to the east sank lower, gradually creating Owens Valley.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> For a summary of current scientific debates about the batholith uplift model, see Craig H. Jones, *The Mountains that Remade America: How Sierra Nevada Geology Impacts Modern Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 216-230.

Notably, for nineteenth-century miners, this period of mountain uplift increased rates of erosion among the upper reaches of the newly elevated Sierras. Put briefly, the higher a mountain becomes, the more quickly it erodes, due to a constellation of factors that include climate, oxygen levels, plant density, and sediment type. The more quickly a mountain erodes, the steeper it becomes; the steeper it becomes, the more quickly it erodes. Without an offsetting uplift force, a range will shrink as wind and rivers redistribute weathered rock into alluvial foothills.<sup>299</sup> In the Sierras, the acceleration of erosion filtered, sorted, and deposited subterranean gold deposits into streambeds. And it did so at just the right time—geologically speaking—for prospectors on the west slope of the Sierras to come upon these loose gold flakes the late 1840s, a discovery that sparked a gold rush that radically redefined California's relationship to the United States.

Crucially, this increase in rates of erosion was uneven. The west slope weathered much more quickly than the east. This is due to the fact that the Sierra's east slope falls under a rain shadow. Whereas portions of the west slope receive more than forty inches of annual precipitation, thanks to its proximity to the Pacific, Owens Valley receives fewer than six, most of which comes from spring runoff from mountain streams in the High Sierras.<sup>300</sup> Lacking a precipitation-rich climate, the east Sierras and the nearby Inyo Mountains weathered more slowly than the west Sierras. Consequently, during the 1840s and 1850s, as prospectors in the west Sierras panned loose gold flakes from active streambeds or blasted it from gravel beds with

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 220-221.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 5.

pressurized jets of water, precious metals near Owens Valley remained encased underground in hard rock. Accessing them would involve boring tunnels into hard rock, carrying out ore, and then processing it to extract the precious metal—a capital- and labor-intensive process known as lode mining.

Because of the lack of erosion along the eastern Sierras, the first Anglo-Americans to encounter Owens Valley gave little thought to its potential for mining. Instead, they treated the valley as a route to the coast. Joseph Reddeford Walker, a fur trader, made the initial forays. In 1834, he led a reconnaissance expedition that entered the valley from central California via a pass in the south Sierras. Seven years later, he charted the same course in reverse while guiding an emigrant train down the valley from Mono Lake.<sup>301</sup> Diaries from expedition members lamented the area's harsh and difficult terrain. The clerk for Walker's first expedition, Zenas Leonard, pronounced "the country on this side . . . much inferior to that on the opposite side—the soil being thin and rather sandy, producing but little grass."<sup>302</sup> Leonard's dreary assessment was not far off the mark. With its lack of precipitation—coupled with a high saline content in valley soil—Owens Valley was hostile to conventional forms of Anglo-American agriculture.<sup>303</sup> Other than Walker's parties and an 1835 excursion into the valley made

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<sup>301</sup> Rebecca Fish Ewan, *A Land Between: Owens Valley, California* (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 7-10.

<sup>302</sup> Zenas Leonard, *Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard* (Chicago, IL: The Lakeside Press, 1934), 202.

<sup>303</sup> On the fraught history of Anglo-American attempts to establish agriculture in Owens Valley, see Peter Vorster, "The Development and Decline of Agriculture in the Owens Valley," in *The History of Water: Eastern Sierra Nevada, Owens Valley, White-Inyo Mountains*, eds. Clarence A. Hall, Victorian Doyle-Jones, Barbara

by a military detachment led by Richard Owen, a guide for John Charles Frémont's third western expedition, no known American ventured into the valley in the 1830s. The perception that Owens Valley was an inhospitable wasteland received state sanction in 1855, when the California legislature commissioned the surveyor Alexis W. Von Schmidt to produce a geographical report on the Sierra's east slope. Schmidt concluded in his report that Owens Valley was "worthless to the white man, both in soil and climate."<sup>304</sup> Alongside Anglo-American patterns of exploration and settlement, there is no evidence that Spanish or Mexican colonizers ventured into Owens Valley, either during the eighteenth or the early nineteenth centuries. As the gold rush took off in the late-1840s on the west side of the Sierras, all indications were that Owens Valley was an inhospitable wasteland. It offered a possible overland route to central California, but little else.

However, in the mid-1850s, prospectors began to examine the east Sierras, spurred on by the successes of gold mining to the west. In the winter of 1859, a group of prospectors working near Yosemite Valley discovered gold flakes in sediment near Mono Lake, just above the northernmost part of Owens Valley.<sup>305</sup> Soon after, a second group unearthed promising signs of silver-lead ore in the Inyo Mountains southeast of Owens Lake. These finds attracted the attention of financiers on the coast, who, as

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Widawski (Los Angeles: University of California, White Mountain Research Station, 1992), 268-284.

<sup>304</sup> William A. Chalfant, *The Story of Inyo* (Independence, CA: self-published, 1922), 72.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 80. On American interest in Owens Valley in 1859, see *The Expedition of Capt. J. W. Davidson from Fort Tejon to the Owens Valley in 1859*, eds. Philip J. Wilke and Harry W. Lawton (Socorro, NM: Ballena Press Publications, 1976), 7.

miners began to exhaust the more easily accessible streambed and gravel deposits, were increasingly willing to undertake the cost and risk of extracting precious metals from hard rock buried underground. Over the next two years, teams of prospectors and mining engineers funneled into Owens Valley and the flanking mountain terrain, boring tunnels, founding town sites, and establishing the necessary infrastructure to support lode mining. Several hundred Americans had moved to the valley by 1861, and investors in San Francisco, New York, and London were beginning to take note.<sup>306</sup>

The move to mine Owens Valley provoked what is euphemistically known as the “Owens Valley Wars,” one of the most violent land dispossession projects in California history. Even though the valley was deemed inhospitable by the first Anglo-Americans who encountered it, it had been inhabited for several thousand years. Paiute communities (known alternately as “Eastern Mono,” “Owens Valley Paiute,” and “Paiute-Shoshone”) comprised the predominant population in the valley’s northern half; Western Shoshone (known alternately as “Panimint or Koso Shoshone”) inhabited the southern part, south of Owens Lake.<sup>307</sup> Both groups thrived by devising

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<sup>306</sup> As news of the valley’s economic potential began to circulate in the regional press, cattlemen from Kern County began driving herds up the south end of the valley for grazing. Chalfant, *The Story of Inyo*, 80 and Vorster, “Agriculture in the Owens Valley,” 271.

<sup>307</sup> Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 308-309; Alfred L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (New York: Dover Publications, 1976), 590, quoted in Lawrence F. Van Horn, *Native American Consultations and Ethnographic Assessment: The Paiutes and Shoshones of Owens Valley, California* (Denver: National Park Service, 1995), 24. In using the terms Paiute and Western Shoshone, I refer to the anthropological terminology that distinguishes the two groups as historically separate but related communities, avoiding the monolithic connotations

irrigation systems that redirected runoff during spring floods, allowing for subsistence agriculture in a region too arid for conventional Anglo-American methods, while mountain trails offered overland trade with the west Sierras.<sup>308</sup>

It is difficult to overstate the impact that the first phases of lode mining had on the Valley's Paiute and Shoshone, which, thanks to the valley's relative geographic isolation, had escaped successive waves of Spanish, Mexican, and United States colonization largely unscathed.<sup>309</sup> With the arrival of prospectors, cattle grazing and land enclosure collapsed the fragile ecology that supported indigenous foodways. Grazing and property disputes soon escalated to vigilante violence, which led to state-sponsored genocide.<sup>310</sup> In the spring of 1862, groups of prospectors killed nearly one

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of the single moniker "Owens Valley Paiute" that occasionally appears in discussions of a nineteenth-century context. But I do so with an awareness that the terms are not consistent or fixed across scholarship. In addition, I note that contemporary indigenous communities in Owens Valley typically self-identify as Owens Valley Paiute, and that the term, when applied to both a twentieth-century and contemporary context, speaks to the intermingling of indigenous groups in the wake of land dispossession.

<sup>308</sup> Prescribed burning was a reported practice as well. Harry W. Lawton, Phillip J. Wilkie, Mary Dedecker, and William M. Mason, "Agriculture Among the Paiute of Owens Valley," *Journal of California Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (July 1976): 13-50.

<sup>309</sup> Sven Liljeblad and Catherine Fowler, "Owens Valley Paiute," in *Handbook of North American Indians, Volume 11: Great Basin*, eds. William C. Sturtevant and Warren L. D'Azevedo (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1986), 412. For broad a study of the impact of Mexican and Anglo-American colonization on California's American Indian population, see Albert L. Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).

<sup>310</sup> In using the term "genocide," I follow historian Benjamin Madley, who, in his landmark study of anti-Indigenous violence in nineteenth-century California, emphasizes that the nature, scale, and state-support of the violence meets the criteria of genocide as defined in the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Madley, *An American Genocide*, 4.



hundred Paiute and Shoshone in a series of massacres before the California's Second Cavalry intervened, accompanied by Nevada dragoons. Between April and June, the combined military-vigilante force killed an additional two hundred people and drove hundreds more from the valley.<sup>311</sup> The Cavalry Captain Moses A. McLaughlin described the goal as total extermination. "They will soon either be killed off," he wrote, "or pushed so far in the surrounding deserts that they will perish by famine."<sup>312</sup> A second wave of state-supported violence took place in the winter of 1864-65, resulting in the deaths of between 62 and 184 Paiute and Shoshone.<sup>313</sup> Violence persisted well into the late-1860s, with sporadic terrorist attacks on the valley's remaining American Indian inhabitants. By 1870, prospectors, working in concert with the state, had killed, imprisoned, or expelled nearly the entire Paiute and Shoshone population of Owens Valley, forcibly deporting hundreds of refugees to the Tejon Indian Reservation southeast of Bakersfield, and later, after the Tejon reservation was disbanded in 1864, to the Tule River Indian Reservation on the western slope of the Sierras.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> The "First Owens Valley War" killed an estimated 318 Eastern Mono and Western Shoshone. *Ibid.*, 309-310. For a narrative account of the conflict, see Brendan C. Lindsay, *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 170-176.

<sup>312</sup> Captain M. A. McLaughlin to Colonel R. C. Drum, April 24, 1863, quoted in Madley, *An American Genocide*, 314.

<sup>313</sup> Madley, *An American Genocide*, 329.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 320; Van Horn, *Native American Consultations*, 3-4. Van Horn's study, prepared for the Manzanar National Historic Site, offers a useful survey of historical and anthropological scholarship, and incorporates firsthand interviews with twentieth-century indigenous inhabitants of the valley.

Despite the scale of the atrocity, McLaughlin's desire for total extermination was not fulfilled. A few hundred American Indians remained in the valley, and took up jobs with mining companies as day laborers and roadbuilders, while retaining the historical agricultural practices where white property laws allowed.<sup>315</sup> In succeeding years, Paiute and Shoshone began to return to the valley from the Tule River Reservation. Accompanied by refugees of affiliated indigenous communities displaced from other parts of the state, they intermixed to form new tribal communities and affiliations. Today, three federally recognized reservations are evident in the valley: the Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Reservation, the Big Pine Reservation, and the Bishop Paiute Reservation.<sup>316</sup>

Amidst the first stages of this repopulation, Anglo-American mining operations expanded rapidly in the valley. By 1872, several profitable mines were in operation, on both the Sierra and Inyo sides of the valley. Supported by a network of recently incorporated town sites, these mines began to draw statewide attention to the

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<sup>315</sup> Chalfant, *The Story of Inyo*, 192-193. Focused studies of the indigenous repopulation of Owens Valley are lacking, making it difficult to assess both the extent of displacement and the patterns of repopulation.

<sup>316</sup> These reservations trace their roots to 1912, when Theodore Roosevelt signed an executive order setting aside land in the valley for a single reservation. Two decades later, Presidents Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt, working in concert with the city of Los Angeles, maneuvered to fragment and downsize the 1912 allotment. The move was part of a broader seizure of water rights in Owens Valley, a seizure meant to support the Los Angeles Aqueduct. Hoover and Roosevelt's efforts culminated in the 1937 establishment of three smaller reservations in the valley. "A History of Water Rights and Land Struggles" Owens Valley Indian Water Commission, <http://www.oviwac.org/water-crusade/>, last accessed 5-20-2020.

economic potential of the surrounding mountains.<sup>317</sup> Meanwhile, Owens Valley boosters worked to attract investment capital to the region. “[Inyo County’s] agricultural and mineral resources, taken together, are unequalled,” the valley’s first newspaper, *The Inyo Independent* (hereafter, *The Independent*) exclaimed in a characteristically grandiose editorial.<sup>318</sup> Amidst this promotional fervor, the Inyo Mountains received special attention. In the spring of 1872, *The Independent* predicted that the Inyos would soon prove a “more opulent metalliferous range than even the Comstock,” the epicenter of the famed 1849-49 California gold rush.<sup>319</sup> Boosters acknowledged that investors might face certain challenges in the Inyos, such as the valley’s geographic isolation and lack of transportation infrastructure, but they expressed confidence that an influx of capital would overcome such difficulties.<sup>320</sup>

Bierstadt’s four trips to Owens Valley took place amidst this promotional fervor. He was evidently swept up in boosters’ rhetoric, for his surviving descriptions of Owens Valley focus exclusively on the opportunities that the area posed for land speculation. From the moment that he stepped foot in Owens Valley, he approached

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<sup>317</sup> The most prominent of these were in the Cerro Gordo district. Located in the foothills of the Inyos just southeast of Owens Lake, the Cerro Gordo mines had for several years extracted significant quantities of silver ore. William A. Chalfant, “Cerro Gordo,” *The Quarterly: Historical Society of Southern California* 22, no. 2 (June 1, 1940): 55-61.

<sup>318</sup> “A Chance for Capital,” *The Inyo Independent*, June 22, 1872, 2.

<sup>319</sup> “Inyo County,” *The Inyo Independent*, May 25, 1872, 2.

<sup>320</sup> “A Chance for Capital,” June 22, 1872, 2. Evidence of this risk was beginning to emerge in 1872. Bierstadt arrived in Owens Valley just two months after the Kearsarge Mining Company, one of the first and largest lode mining operations in the valley, declared bankruptcy. “Local Affairs,” *The Inyo Independent*, March 2, 1872, 3.

dispossessed land with an eye toward potential profit. His interest in speculation is evident in a letter that he wrote on May 8th, 1872, shortly after arriving in the valley for the first time. Addressed to his friend and occasional business partner, the New York author William Stoddard, the letter—the only fragment from the conversation that survives—offers useful insights into how Bierstadt perceived the value of Owens Valley land. “I am sorry you have not come out here to see the mines in Owens Valley, which are beginning to look up,” the letter begins, “I saw an immense amount of ore there and two men had a pile six hundred thousand dollars taken out this year.”<sup>321</sup> Bierstadt emphasized that they should act quickly, acquiring mining land before “the property gets too high” in price. According to the artist, a railroad would soon connect the valley to Los Angeles, a development that would drive up property values, resulting in a potential windfall for those who bought in early.<sup>322</sup>

Bierstadt’s letter indicates his desire to participate in an economy of natural resource extraction. This may be an obvious fact to point out, but it is worth emphasizing because it runs counter to recuperative views of the artist, which portray Bierstadt as someone who was anxious about or troubled by the aggressive economic forces that drove American Western industrial development and territorial

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<sup>321</sup> Albert Bierstadt to William O. Stoddard, May 8, 1872, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Archives, Winterthur Library. The \$600,000 figure was likely an exaggeration. In 1872 all of the mines in the Cerro Gordo district alone collectively extracted just under \$1,000,000 in ore. Gary L. Shumway, Larry Vredenburg, and Russell Harthill, *Desert Fever: An Overview of Mining in the California Desert Conservation Area* (Riverside, CA: Bureau of Land Management, 1980), 149.

<sup>322</sup> Bierstadt to Stoddard, May 8, 1872.

expropriation, particularly during the middle and latter stages of his artistic career.<sup>323</sup> This latter historical narrative is also recuperative in nature. It portrays Bierstadt as a historically exceptional sympathizer of and advocate for dispossessed American Indians.

This is a misleading characterization of Bierstadt. Bierstadt may not have conspired to facilitate anti-Indigenous violence in Owens Valley—land dispossession efforts were complete by the time of his arrival and he was probably ignorant of their full extent. Nonetheless, all of the surviving archival evidences indicates that the painter was singularly focused in Owens Valley on how to claim expropriated lands as his own property. He located the value of Eastern California land in its potential to be acquired as real estate. Bierstadt approached the forcible colonization of Owens Valley as an opportunistic speculator, not as an anti-colonial sympathizer.

*Mount Corcoran* thereby reinforces the settler-colonial ideologies that helped justify American Western territorial expropriation and industrial expansion. Despite its unconventional relationship to its subject, *Mount Corcoran* is quite conventional in that its pictorial content functions to erase any meaningful trace of American Indian history in Owens Valley. The composition is devoid of any sign of prior human activity—of anything that might be construed as a reference to the Eastern Mono, Western Shoshone, the prospectors who had sparked the process of conquest, or even the stereotyped representations of Indianness that frequently populate Bierstadt's

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<sup>323</sup> Peter H. Hassrick, "Art, Agency, and Conservation: A Fresh Look at Bierstadt's Vision of the West," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 68, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 3-11, 14-26, 90-91; idem., *Albert Bierstadt: Witness to a Changing West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, in cooperation with the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, 2018).

landscapes, which enact narratives of self-motivated leave-taking and departure.<sup>324</sup> With its absence of human presence, the composition fits easily within a broader historical trajectory of American landscape painting, one often dated to Thomas Cole, which imagines American land as a bountiful and unoccupied natural resource freely available to white settlers. Bierstadt's painting is entirely forward looking. *Mount Corcoran* invites viewers to step onto the shore of an Edenic landscape and claim its contents as their own.

If anything, the picture-subject relationship in *Mount Corcoran* enacts an even more thorough erasure of history than what is customary. Bierstadt's decision to retroactively change his picture's subject hinges on the assumption that the history of Owens Valley is of no value in its own right. Bearing its generic title, *Mountain Lake* was a picture devoid of a meaningful tie to place, devoid of a history other than the immediate circumstances of its production and display. The generically titled mountain scene awaited the arrival of the artist—or patron—who might stake a claim to it and its contents. In other words, *Mountain Lake* functioned as unclaimed land—land whose value hinges entirely on its status as an available commodity. In this picture-subject dynamic, the Eastern Mono and Western Shoshone are rendered invisible.

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<sup>324</sup> As Karl Kusserow puts it, in Bierstadt's works "genocide is presented as georgic, with the 'passing away' of a people, as Bierstadt called it, rendered as natural as the earth's rhythms." Kusserow, "The Trouble with Empire," in *Nature's Nation: American Art and Environment*, eds. idem. and Alan Braddock (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 128.

### **Bierstadt and the Consumption of Topographic Knowledge**

In addition to revealing Bierstadt's interest in Owens Valley's nascent mining economy, and in turn providing a framework for emphasizing *Mount Corcoran's* relationship to settler-colonial ideologies, Bierstadt's 1872 letter to Stoddard points to how the artist actually went about claiming mining land. At the conclusion of his letter, Bierstadt suggested that Stoddard contact "Major Egbert" in the valley for assistance finding a suitable mining property and "retaining for you the service of good men afterward."<sup>325</sup> "Major Egbert," or Harry Clay Egbert, was the commanding Army Officer stationed in Owens Valley. In 1872, the year that Bierstadt first visited the valley, Egbert and his men carried out a series of reconnaissance expeditions for the War Department in the east Inyos—a remote and largely unexplored area that was rumored to contain promising mineral deposits. There, he came into contact with James Brady, a mining engineer who was one of the first—if not the first—to attempt to mine the east Inyos. Egbert and Brady soon struck up a partnership. In anticipation of future development, they worked to secure potentially lucrative east Inyo mining land, while attempting to court interested speculators as investors. Bierstadt's reference to Egbert, then, links the tracing to an ad hoc professional collaboration aimed at capitalizing on the production of topographic and geologic knowledge about the east Inyos.

Biographical information on Egbert is limited, confined almost exclusively to records of his movements as an Army officer. Born in Philadelphia in 1839, he enlisted in the 12th Infantry Division of the Union Army during the Civil War, where he quickly rose to the rank of First Lieutenant. He fought at Gettysburg and was taken

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<sup>325</sup> Bierstadt to Stoddard, May 8, 1872.

captive for a brief period by the Confederacy. Just before the end of the war he received a promotion to Captain and took charge of the 12th Infantry.<sup>326</sup> Details of Egbert's activities in the immediate aftermath of the war are scarce, but in July of 1869 he relocated to California when the War Department assigned the 12th Infantry to Fort Independence, then a small outpost a few miles north of Owens Lake.<sup>327</sup>

By this point the dispossession of indigenous lands in the valley was complete. Egbert and his forces played no documented role in overt acts of colonial violence.<sup>328</sup> Instead, as the leader of a military occupation, Egbert focused on conducting wayfinding and reconnaissance along the east slope of the Inyo Mountains, roughly thirteen miles due east of the valley floor. According to *The Independent*, these expeditions were made “for the purposes of obtaining topographical notes for the use of the War Department.”<sup>329</sup> His first known trip took place in the summer of 1871, when, on two separate occasions, local guides vanished north of Death Valley while assisting an Army Corps of Engineers survey expedition led by George Wheeler.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>326</sup> Biographical details on Egbert's Civil War years appear in “Life of a Soldier,” *Daily Argus News (Crawfordsville, Ind.)*, July 22, 1899, 3.

<sup>327</sup> Entry 297, Letters Received by the Appointment, Commission, and Personal Branch/ACP Files (1871-1894); Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 94; National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

<sup>328</sup> Egbert reportedly offered protection to the few Eastern Mono and Western Shoshone who had returned to the valley to work as laborers in the mines. Dorothy Cragen, *The Boys in the Sky-Blue Pants: The Men and Events at Camp Independence and Forts of Eastern California, Nevada, and Utah, 1862-1877* (Fresno, CA: Pioneer Pub. Co., 1975), 108.

<sup>329</sup> “Gold Mountain, etc.,” *The Inyo Independent*, February 24, 1872, 1.

<sup>330</sup> An interesting side note to these disappearances is that one of the guides, William Egan, disappeared while attempting to mark a route for the famed photographer



Egbert, along with his Lieutenant, Harry Haskell, aided in the search, which proved unsuccessful.<sup>331</sup> The following February, Egbert sent Haskell to explore the Saline Valley, which skirts the Eastern edge of the Inyos.<sup>332</sup> Haskell ventured as far as the northernmost edge of Death Valley, roughly fifty miles further to the southeast, before returning to Fort Independence.<sup>333</sup> Later that summer or in the early fall—the exact date is unclear—Egbert led a shorter excursion into the east Inyos, where he discovered traces of gold northeast of Waucoba Mountain.<sup>334</sup>

Egbert's expeditions took place during a period in which topographic knowledge about the east Inyos was not widely available, even for those living in

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Timothy O'Sullivan, who planned to photograph Cottonwood Canyon, a remote landmark north of Death Valley. Following behind Egan with his equipment, O'Sullivan struggled with the harsh terrain and summer heat. He turned back before reaching the Canyon. Egan was never seen again. For an account of the guides' disappearances, see Richard E. Lingefelter, *Death Valley and the Amargosa: A Land of Illusion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 91-97.

<sup>331</sup> Cragen, *The Boys in the Sky-Blue Pants*, 109.

<sup>332</sup> During this expedition, which originated in the north-central portion of Owens Valley, Haskell placed landmarks to guide travelers along a preliminary road in the Inyos northeast of Lone Pine, but *The Independent* admitted that the landmarks themselves were difficult to find: "we cannot give their locations with sufficient accuracy to be of any value." "Gold Mountain, etc.," *The Inyo Independent*, February 24, 1872, 2.

<sup>333</sup> "A Prospecting Scout," *The Inyo Independent*, February 17, 1872, 3. For biographical material on Haskell see "Brigadier General Harry L. Haskell's Enlistment Record," Phelps Family History in America, last accessed 7-28-19, <http://www.phelpsfamilyhistory.com/branches/haskell/record.asp>.

<sup>334</sup> Unrau, *Death Valley National Monument*, 12, 84. These were likely not the only trips that he took to the east Inyos during this period, but they are those for which archival evidence survives.

Owens Valley. During the 1860s, few publicly available textual or visual depictions of the area existed. *The Independent*, the region's primary newspaper—and a source typically attuned to the latest developments in local mines—makes no mention of the east Inyos during the 1860s. Furthermore, no period photographs of the east Inyos survive. In fact, there is no evidence that any nineteenth-century photographer ventured further east into the Inyos than the Cerro Gordo mines, which were in the western foothills of the Inyos, just above Owens Lake.<sup>335</sup> This is not to say, however, that topographic knowledge of this area did not exist. Traces of its presence and the manner in which it circulated linger in period maps. What these maps reveal is that such knowledge was produced, passed on, and received independently of the scientific armature of state surveys and that only small groups of insiders had access to it.

The first known map of Owens Valley, *Holt's Mining Map of the Inyo Mountains* (fig. 4.4), indicates that some information about the east Inyos had become publicly available.<sup>336</sup> Published in 1864 in San Francisco by Warren Holt and made by

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<sup>335</sup> The Eastern California Museum in Independence, California houses the largest archive of Owens Valley historical material. Museum staff confirmed that no photographs of the Waucoba district exist in their collection. Two photographers were active in the valley in the 1870s: H. Buehman, who photographed the aftermath of the Lone Pine earthquake in 1872, and Alfred Shea Addis, who opened a studio in Independence in 1873. Both men specialized in architectural views. For references to Addis and Buehman, see "Local Affairs," *The Inyo Independent*, June 1, 1872, 3; "Local Affairs," *The Inyo Independent*, May 17, 1873, 3; "Local Affairs," *The Inyo Independent*, June 28, 1873, 3; "Local Affairs," *The Inyo Independent*, July 12, 1873, 3; and "Addis, the Photographer," *The Inyo Independent*, August 7, 1875, 3. A brief discussion of Addis appears in *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: A Biographical Dictionary, 1840-1865*, eds. Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 68-69, although Palmquist does not mention Addis' Inyo County work.

<sup>336</sup> The map was on of a series of maps of California and Nevada issued in San Francisco by the publisher and mining speculator Warren Holt. In 1864, a brief notice

the private surveyor Arthur W Keddie, *Holt's Mining Map* identifies a few key (and quite remote) topographic features to the east, such as the dry lakebed situated in present-day Saline Valley, plus the broad ridge that separates Saline Valley from Deep Springs Valley to the north (fig. 4.5).<sup>337</sup> Unfortunately, the circumstances of the map's production are lost, so it is unclear how Keddie acquired information about the east Inyos. He either ventured east himself or relied on secondhand information provided by local prospectors or soldiers.<sup>338</sup> Indeed, the indistinct freehand hachures of the hand-colored lithograph seem to evoke the vagaries of topographic knowledge about the area, suggesting in turn that the map functioned less as an orienteering device

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reporting the publication of *Holt's Mining Map of the Inyo Mountains* appeared in local newspapers. "Map of the Coso Mining District," *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco), April 24, 1864, 1. For advertisements of the other mining maps that Holt produced, or his large wall maps of California and Nevada, see "Map of White Pine," *Daily Alta California* (San Francisco), January 15, 1869, 3; "New Map of California and Nevada," *San Francisco Examiner*, January 22, 1869, 3. In addition to his role as a map publisher, Holt was involved in land speculation schemes in San Francisco and mining schemes north of Owens Valley. "County Court—Homestead Association," *Daily Alta California*, April 21, 1866, 1; "Mining Items," *Daily Alta California*, April 16, 1864, 3.

<sup>337</sup> Born in Scotland and raised in Ontario, Canada, Keddie arrived in California in September of 1863. Soon after, he took up a job assisting the San Francisco publisher Warren Holt in the completion of maps of California and Nevada. During the late-1860s, Keddie surveyed potential transcontinental routes for the Central Pacific Railroad. While the California State Railroad Museum Library and Archives includes a moderate amount of material on Keddie, the earliest documentation in their collection dates to 1867, well after Keddie had finished work on *Holt's Mining Map*. "Arthur Walter Keddie Family Papers," Online Archive of California, last accessed 10-17-19, <https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8m61ksw/?query=arthur+keddie>.

<sup>338</sup> It is also possible that he gathered information from local Mono or Shoshone, but this seems unlikely given the degree of settler-colonial violence during this period.

rooted in precise topographic knowledge and more as a broad promotional overview of the valley's nascent mining industry.

What is clear is that the representation of the east Inyos in *Holt's Mining Map* was not based on information provided by state or federal authorities. In 1866, the General Land Office (GLO) published *Map of Public Surveys in California & Nevada*, an atlas map showing the progress of government-backed surveys throughout California (fig. 4.6). Notably, the map leaves out the east Inyos; the region appears as a blank space. Just to the southwest, an overlaid grid indicates that state surveyors had so far only covered Owens Valley and the west slope of the Inyos (fig. 4.7). From the perspective of the state survey, land that had not been represented through its bureaucratic and technological armature was unknown land. However, *Holt's Mining Map*, published two years before the GLO's map, indicates that knowledge of and mining interest in the east Inyos existed prior to the arrival of GLO officials, and that it was produced independently of their surveys.

State surveyors would not begin to venture into the east Inyos until 1870, just before Egbert began his reconnaissance work. That summer, Josiah Dwight Whitney, then the head of the California State Geological Survey (CSGS), the successor to the GLO in California, sent his chief topographer, Charles F. Hoffman, to map the full extent of the east Inyo slope, from the base of Owens Valley to its northern terminus at Mono Lake.<sup>339</sup> Next, George Wheeler visited Camp Independence in Inyo County

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<sup>339</sup> Edwin Tenney Brewster, *Life and Letters of Josiah Dwight Whitney* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), 271.

following his survey's ill-fated 1871 foray into Death Valley.<sup>340</sup> A third round of surveying took place in May of 1872, when Whitney and the CSGS returned to the valley to inspect the damage of the Lone Pine Earthquake, which had struck Owens Valley six weeks prior.<sup>341</sup> While studying the aftermath of the quake, Whitney and his team measured distances and elevations along the valley and the flanking mountain slopes, building upon the data that Hoffman had compiled in 1870.<sup>342</sup>

The CSGS planned to translate measurements from their 1870 and 1872 expeditions into map form, a project that would make Eastern California legible through a centralized, state-sanctioned process of scientific measurement.<sup>343</sup> Produced through cutting edge scientific techniques, Whitney's map would offer viewers a sense of ocular mastery, an all-encompassing view of previously invisible terrain. In doing so, Whitney's map would also function as an assertion of state power and sovereignty, granting the state increased legitimacy in litigating disputes over property ownership.

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<sup>340</sup> Richard V. Francaviglia, *Mapping and Imagination in the Great Basin: A Cartographic History* (Reno, Nev.: University of Nevada Press, 2005), 123-135; Toby Jurovics, *Reading the West: The Survey Photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, in association with the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., 2010), 194.

<sup>341</sup> "On the Scene," *Inyo Independent*, May 18, 1872, 3. According to the paper, Whitney's survey arrived in the valley on May 9.

<sup>342</sup> Whitney's reports on the earthquake appeared in Whitney, "The Owens Valley Earthquake, Part 1," *Overland Monthly* 9 (August 1872): 130-140 and idem., "The Owens Valley Earthquake, Part 2," *Overland Monthly* 9 (September 1872): 266-278.

<sup>343</sup> William H. Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West* (New York: History Book Club, 1993), 355-389.

Put differently, Whitney's CS GS map would emphatically mark California land as the domain of an authoritative and centralized state.

However, in 1872 this map did not yet exist. On May 25, 1872, *The Independent* declared that CS GS officials were at work on the map, and that it "was intended to be perfectly accurate in all its details, and as we know from an examination of a proof sheet, is executed with the greatest skill."<sup>344</sup> But copies of the map, Hoffman's *Topographical Map of Central California Together with a Part of Nevada* (figs. 4.8-9), would not appear until 1873. And due to funding cuts enacted by the California Legislature it was never fully completed.<sup>345</sup> Only three of the four sheets that comprised the map included fully finished topographic renderings. It is unknown whether Bierstadt ever saw a copy.

The delay in the delivery of CS GS knowledge raises the question of how Bierstadt could have acquired information about the east Inyos. His May 1872 visit did overlap with the CS GS' visit to Owens Valley.<sup>346</sup> Thus, it is tempting to enfold Bierstadt's interest in east Inyo mining into a historical narrative of improved cartographic precision, especially since the CS GS is often portrayed as the first

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<sup>344</sup> "The Geological Survey," *The Inyo Independent*, May 25, 1872, 1.

<sup>345</sup> Edward A. Byerly, "The Politics of Topographic Mapping: J.D. Whitney, C.F. Hoffman, and the California State Geological Survey, 1860-1874," *Southern California Quarterly* 82, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 343-64.

<sup>346</sup> Given the timing of Bierstadt's May 8 letter to Stoddard as well as the fact that *The Independent* reported that the survey had arrived in Owens Valley in May 9, it is possible that Bierstadt travelled with Whitney's team, although the evidence is circumstantial.

scientifically accurate effort to map all of California.<sup>347</sup> Such an account would cast the painter as someone who was aware of current developments in surveying and who followed Whitney's party to the Inyos in the hopes of gleaning valuable geological and mineralogical knowledge as it was produced. In this narrative, state authorities created conditions that facilitated private investment and development—capital followed knowledge. This narrative seems all the more appealing given that Bierstadt's stature as an artist regularly put him into close proximity with leading figures of surveying in the 1870s—not just Whitney, but also Clarence King, the head of the famed 40th Parallel Survey.<sup>348</sup>

However, this interpretation leaves out the forms of geologic and topographic knowledge that were put into circulation and consumed independently of state surveys, and it mislocates Bierstadt's social positioning vis-à-vis the CSGS. There is

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<sup>347</sup> See, for example, Goetzmann, *Exploration and Empire*, 363.

<sup>348</sup> In fact, Bierstadt spent significant portions of his second and third trips to Owens Valley, both made in the summer of 1872, travelling and sketching in the High Sierras with King. In August of 1872, on his second trip, Bierstadt accompanied a group of Army officers sent from San Francisco to inspect the damage wrought by the Lone Pine earthquake. "Local Affairs," *The Inyo Independent*, August 3, 1872, 3. Bierstadt left the military party during their passage through the High Sierras and joined King's survey party near the Kings River. "Local Affairs," *The Inyo Independent*, August 17, 1872, 3; Thurman Wilkins, *Clarence King: A Biography: Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 154. On August 24, *The Independent* reported that Bierstadt had arrived at Fort Independence. "Bierstadt," *The Inyo Independent*, August 24, 1872, 2. In mid-September, during his third trip, Bierstadt rejoined King, this time to study glaciers in the Evolution Group of peaks in the High Sierras west-northwest of the town of Bishop in Owens Valley. After several weeks in the Sierras, Bierstadt travelled with King down to Owens Valley, arriving in Independence on September 29. A few days later, they returned to the King's River area, where they remained for several weeks before returning to San Francisco. Wilkins, *Clarence King*, 173-74.

no definitive evidence that the painter was ever directly proximate to the actual labor of surveying in the Inyo Mountains, whether in terms of fieldwork or picture or map creation. Instead, he worked with those proximate to the survey but not actively involved in it—men like Egbert, whose responsibilities as an occupying military force granted them greater familiarity with the day-to-day progress of prospecting within the Inyos.

When Egbert ventured into the east Inyos, he did so on behalf of the War Department, not the CSGS. And through these excursions, he discovered signs of precious metals that were not previously known to GLO or CSGS officials (or if they were known, such information had not yet been made public). Following this, he moved to profit from his findings by passing on tips to interested speculators like Bierstadt, who passed on these tips to potential speculators like Stoddard. And as information began to flow through this small network operating outside of CSGS bureaucracy, rumors of a pending railroad appeared in the local press, hinting at a potential windfall for those willing to acquire undeveloped land.<sup>349</sup>

The timing of these developments is key. Egbert became interested in the east Inyos sometime around the winter of 1871-72. This was after Hoffman had mapped the east Inyo slope for the CSGS in 1870, but before Whitney arrived to map the rest of the valley in 1872, and before the CSGS publicized their findings. Therefore, the knowledge that Egbert accumulated and circulated was unrelated to the CSGS' involvement. As state surveyors moved methodically back and forth across Owens Valley and the nearby Inyos, systematically accumulating topographic information for

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<sup>349</sup> "A Sterile Region," *The Inyo Independent*, April 13, 1872.



a map that they would never complete, Egbert embarked on a series of his own land speculations in the east Inyos. In other words, he worked to claim Inyo space as his own property before it fell under the domain of a centralized state and before it became legible to the broader public.

With all of this in mind, a loose but suggestive affinity emerges between the manner in which Bierstadt corresponded with Egbert in Owens Valley and the manner in which he named the real Mount Corcoran. Bierstadt did not seek official approval to rename the mountain; rather, it seems that he found a mid-level official who was willing and able to inscribe the name onto an official War Department map at Bierstadt's request, a "Major Elliot" whose identity otherwise remains unknown.<sup>350</sup> Only later, in the 1880s, would the name become official.<sup>351</sup> The value of the two

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<sup>350</sup> In an 1877 letter to William McLeod, Bierstadt asked McLeod to give a print of one of the artist's Rocky Mountain paintings to "Major Elliot," "who is in charge of the map department in the war office." Given the timing, it is possible that this was a gift sent by Bierstadt in return for naming the peak, although the evidence is entirely circumstantial. Albert Bierstadt to William MacLeod, July 12, 1877, Box 2, Folder 1131-1140, William Corcoran Papers, Box 2, Director's Correspondence #871-1380, Special Collections Research Center, George Washington University. William MacLeod personally delivered the map to Elliot, and later, when he became skeptical of Bierstadt's claim that the picture represented Mount Corcoran, consulted with Elliot about how Bierstadt had managed to name the peak. William MacLeod Curator's Journal, 1878, digital typescript of original manuscript, George Washington University, 10, [https://archive.org/details/corc\\_macleodjournaltrans1878/page/n3](https://archive.org/details/corc_macleodjournaltrans1878/page/n3), last accessed 10/29/19.

<sup>351</sup> The name became official when George Wheeler came upon Bierstadt's change while compiling his multivolume report of his survey and simply decided to accept it, noting in his report that "this peak has since been called Mount Corcoran by the artist, Mr. Albert Bierstadt." George Montague Wheeler, *Report Upon the United States Geographical Surveys West of the One Hundredth Meridian* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1889), 99.

sites, a mountain in the High Sierras and a remote mining area in the Inyos, stemmed from the fact that they could be accessed outside of or on the margins of official bureaucratic structures, that they could be secured privately and prior to the delivery of centralized, state-sponsored knowledge. One might also suggest that the renaming of Mount Corcoran relied on the mechanisms of real estate. Bierstadt named his mountain through what was, in effect, a land deal. Much like filing a claim in a land office, Bierstadt obtained approval from the appropriate War Department authorities, had a map marked, and acquired a meaningful—and in this case profitable—link between his patron, his painting, and a real mountain.

### **James Brady and the Waucoba Mining District**

Even before Ebert discovered signs of gold northeast of Waucoba Mountain in the winter of 1871-72, a prospector named James Brady was already at work there marking out claim sites and digging tunnels for potential silver mines.<sup>352</sup> Brady's operations fell within a roughly twelve-square-mile area known at the time as the Waucoba Mining District (hereafter the Waucoba district), which encompassed the remote and rugged mountain terrain that separates Deep Springs Valley from Saline Valley. This small district, never more than a footnote in regional histories, would come to shape Bierstadt's interest in Eastern California in significant ways, ways that offer the key to a new understanding how *Mount Corcoran* functions as a depiction of the High Sierras.

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<sup>352</sup> It is possible that Brady was not the first to prospect this particular area either. In February, *The Independent* reported the existence of a nearby abandoned cabin that had once been owned by a man named Jimmy Sharpe, whose identity remains lost. "Gold Mountain, etc.," *The Inyo Independent*, February 24, 1872, 3

A San Francisco mining engineer whose early life remains unknown, Brady moved to Owens Valley in 1869, when he took up a position as a manager of a milling operation on the northeastern shore of Owens Lake, where he enjoyed a mercurial rise. Under Brady's supervision, the mill quickly became the primary ore-processing center for the booming Cerro Gordo mines, then the most profitable and extensive mining operation in the area (fig. 4.10).<sup>353</sup> Within three years, Brady had founded the town of Swansea at the mill site, opened a nearby hotel, and acquired his own mining claims in the nearby Cerro Gordo district.<sup>354</sup> Yet Brady was perhaps best known for his role in the shipping industry, where he worked to mitigate one of the key challenges facing local mines: the high cost of carrying extracted ore overland from Owens Valley to Los Angeles. To accomplish this, he commissioned a steamboat to transport goods directly across Owens Lake, eliminating a costly and time consuming wagon journey around its shoreline.<sup>355</sup> Soon after, he secured a freighting contract to ship ore overland from Owens Lake to Los Angeles.<sup>356</sup> He also lobbied the California Legislature—unsuccessfully, it seems—to issue land grants for a railroad connecting the Owens Valley mines to Los Angeles, a route that would have eliminated a slow

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<sup>353</sup> Robert C. Likes and Glenn R. Day, *From This Mountain: Cerro Gordo* (Bishop, CA: Sierra Media Inc. 1975), 20.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 29. See also, "Waucoba," *The Inyo Independent*, May 18, 1872, 2.

<sup>355</sup> "Letter from Lone Pine," *Sacramento Daily Union*, May 26, 1870, 3.

<sup>356</sup> Likes and Day, *From This Mountain*, 36.

and costly overland journey by mule-train.<sup>357</sup> And much like William Newton Byers, the editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*, whom Bierstadt had encountered in 1863, Brady sought out ways of leveraging his professional and political connections into profitable investment opportunities.

It is unclear when exactly Brady began prospecting in the east Inyos, or when he partnered with Egbert and Haskell. It is possible that he first encountered the area in the summer of 1871, for he reportedly aided the military search parties looking for Wheeler's lost scouts.<sup>358</sup> The timing makes this likely, given that by the spring of 1872, when Egbert was conducting his east Inyo reconnaissance, the local press published a short notice claiming that Brady had begun to lay the groundwork for lode mining operations in the district.<sup>359</sup> In June, a month after Bierstadt arrived in Owens Valley, Brady announced a plan to build a wagon road connecting the valley to his mines in the Waucoba district. At this point, Brady also claimed that he already had one functional silver-lead mine in operation, that he had made exploratory diggings at four more sites nearby, and that he had ordered parts for an on-site smelter.<sup>360</sup> He was

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<sup>357</sup> "Railroad in Los Angeles – Lands," *Sacramento Daily Union*, January 31, 1872, 2. The land grant bill was referred to the Committee on Corporations, which did not take up the bill for consideration.

<sup>358</sup> Cragen, *The Boys in the Sky-Blue Pants*, 109.

<sup>359</sup> "Waucoba," *The Inyo Independent*, May 18, 1872, 3.

<sup>360</sup> Had this smelter ever been completed, it would have been the first in the east Inyos. "Local Affairs," *The Inyo Independent*, June 29, 1872, 3. Given Egbert and Brady's close relationship, it is possible Bierstadt's May 1872 letter to Stoddard, which encouraged Stoddard to "get in before the property gets too high," was in reference to Brady's claims.

evidently confident in his findings, for in the fall of 1872 he started to liquidate his other assets to fund construction and roadbuilding.<sup>361</sup>

In October, *The Independent* hinted at Brady's ultimate plan: a joint-stock lode mining corporation. "It is rumored," the paper reported, "that a number of the most important mines of [the Waucoba district] are to be consolidated as the property of one large company, and incorporated."<sup>362</sup> *The Independent* endorsed the possibility, suggesting that a joint-stock company might finally attract investment capital to the east Inyos. "There are a number of good mines scattered throughout the district," read a November editorial, "and with capital and proper management they can be made to contribute a large amount to the wealth of the country."<sup>363</sup> With the prospect of incorporation on the horizon, *The Independent* began to portray the Waucoba district as the next great California mining boomtown. Brady's preliminary diggings had revealed tantalizing glimpses of hidden riches: "mines or ledges of silver, gold or galena ores of extraordinary richness, to say nothing of hundreds of inferior grade that might be worked to fair profit under favorable circumstances."<sup>364</sup> All of this, the paper claimed, was surrounded by "an ample supply of water, wood and grass for animals employed about the works, . . . all as fine as could be wished for."<sup>365</sup> According to *The*

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<sup>361</sup> In October, he sold several of his Cerro Gordo mining claims, his hotel, and his stake in the *Bessie Brady*. "Mining Sale," *The Inyo Independent*, October 5, 1872, 2.

<sup>362</sup> "Waucoba," *The Inyo Independent*, October 5, 1872, 2.

<sup>363</sup> "Local Affairs—Waucoba," *The Inyo Independent*, November 9, 1872, 3.

<sup>364</sup> "A Railroad South," *The Inyo Independent*, September 7, 1872, 2.

<sup>365</sup> "Local Affairs," *The Inyo Independent* June 29, 1872, 3.

*Independent*, “the prospects are altogether favorable for that district soon to become the most prominent and valuable of any in Inyo county.”<sup>366</sup>

By late fall, Brady began to court outside investors. The first to consider acquiring a stake was an Englishman, Captain Samuel Jones, then the superintendent of the Eclipse Mining Company, an English-owned mine operating in the Inyo foothills southeast of the town of Independence. In November, Egbert and Haskell took Jones on a pack trip to see the Waucoba district (their involvement indicates that by this point the two soldiers had taken an interest in Brady’s mines).<sup>367</sup> Following the visit, *The Independent* published a series of rumors on Jones’ plans. First, the paper stated that the Eclipse Company intended to acquire Brady’s operations in their entirety, but that “certain obstacles” had temporarily delayed the deal.<sup>368</sup> Shortly after, the paper noted that Jones had returned to England and that he had purchased new mining properties on the Sierra side of Owens Valley, “and also,” according to *The Independent*, “if we are not misinformed, in the Waucoba district.”<sup>369</sup> A few days later, the paper published a correction. Jones had returned to England without acquiring any of Brady’s other claims.

Fortunately for Brady, Bierstadt quickly stepped in as a replacement for Jones. In February of 1873, the *Sacramento Daily Union* reported that articles of

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid. For similar rhetoric, see “A Sterile Region” April 13, 1872; “Prospect Your Mines,” *The Inyo Independent*, July 27, 1872.

<sup>367</sup> “Local Affairs,” *The Inyo Independent*, November 9, 1872, 3.

<sup>368</sup> “The Eclipse Company, Etc.,” *Inyo Independent*, November 28, 1872, 3.

<sup>369</sup> “Off for England,” *The Inyo Independent*, December 14, 1872, 3.

incorporation for the Waucoba Mining and Smelting Company had been filed in San Francisco the previous December.<sup>370</sup> The paper listed Bierstadt as a co-director of the Waucoba Company, alongside three San Francisco entrepreneurs: William Alvord, then the mayor of San Francisco, John Hewston Jr., a San Francisco assayer who had joined Bierstadt in Yellowstone in 1863, and Nathan Porter, a San Francisco district attorney.<sup>371</sup> In addition to these three, the co-directors also included Egbert, Haskell, and Brady. According to the brief notice that appeared in the *Sacramento Daily Union*, the Waucoba Company planned to issue \$2,000,000 in \$100 shares to finance the construction of roads and mining infrastructure in the Waucoba district.<sup>372</sup>

Shortly after the incorporation of the Waucoba Company, Brady asked the famed geologist Clarence King to evaluate the company's landholdings. King paid a visit to the Waucoba district that fall.<sup>373</sup> A few months later, he published a lengthy

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<sup>370</sup> "City Intelligence," *Sacramento Daily Union*, February 13, 1873.

<sup>371</sup> Hewston's presence in Yosemite with Bierstadt is mentioned in *American Paintings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Vol. 2, A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born Between 1816 and 1845*, ed. Natalie Spassky (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), 343. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate additional archival material related to Alvord, Hewston and Porter's involvement in the Waucoba Company.

<sup>372</sup> Shortly after the incorporation of the Waucoba Company, Brady published a short report in which he claimed that the Waucoba Company's landholdings were extensive, encompassing "over one hundred mines and mining locations; four town sites of 640 acres each, . . . and all the available water in that part of the district within reach." James Brady, *Mining Engineer's Report: Waucoba Mining and Smelting Company* (Independence, CA: Chalfant & Parker, 1873), 2.

<sup>373</sup> "Waucoba District," *The Inyo Independent*, December 6, 1873, 3. King was no stranger to high-risk mining schemes. On his many failures as a mining investor, see

summary of his findings in *The Independent*, where he offered a cautious but optimistic endorsement of the Waucoba Company's potential. Notably, he underscored the transportation difficulties that the fledgling company would face. In particular, he pointed out that while company roadbuilders had succeeded in establishing a route from the town of Independence to Mazurka Canyon—a small slot canyon that connects the district to the west Inyos above Waucoba Mountain—miners still had to travel nine miles by mule trail to the company's camp on Powzina Creek. Brady's mines remained extremely remote. It was time consuming, dangerous, and costly to transport mining equipment into the district and ore out of it.<sup>374</sup> After noting these lingering difficulties, King also pointed out that “very little development work has been done” to develop the company's mines.

Nonetheless, King remained enthusiastic about the district's potential. Near the end of his report he turned his attention to five preliminary diggings that Brady had conducted. These showed promise. “Neither in Utah, Nevada or at Cerro Gordo,” King exclaimed, “have I seen such an important surface developments [sic] of lead ore.” He proposed that an additional \$30,000 investment be made to fund additional tunneling at these locations. This would be costly, he admitted, but he felt that “the natural indications are ample to warrant the above indicated expenditure.” Brady evidently heeded King's advice. Several months after King shared his findings in *The*

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Martha A. Sandweiss, *Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

<sup>374</sup> Clarence King, “Waucoba Again,” *Inyo Independent*, December 13, 1873, 2.



*Independent*, he sold \$30,000 of his own mining lands in the Cerro Gordo district, apparently to fund additional diggings.<sup>375</sup>

Other than King's assessment and a short prospectus issued by Brady, potential investors had access to very little information about the district. To most, the district was known only through fragments of secondhand information passed on by Brady and Egbert. Thanks to the district's remoteness, difficult terrain, and lack of passable roads, few in Owens Valley could actually visit the mines in question. The harsh Inyo environment inhibited close scrutiny of its mineralogical contents. Speculators like Bierstadt had to invest sight unseen, relying exclusively on secondhand information.

The district's relative inaccessibility informed how *The Independent* covered Brady's progress. In an article on the development of the Waucoba Company, editors for the paper acknowledged that it had been "some time since [we] made a personal visit of inspection to these mines"<sup>376</sup> Separated from Brady's mines by miles of uncharted, difficult terrain, the editors chose to rely on secondhand accounts, a fact that they freely admitted to in their coverage of the Waucoba district. "Col. Brady informs us," the paper stated when reporting that new mining equipment had been transported to the district, acknowledging that they were passing on information sourced from Brady and his associates.<sup>377</sup> "We hear that Major Egbert and Jas. Brady

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<sup>375</sup> Sale of Mining Property," *The Inyo Independent*, October 10, 1874, 3. See also, "Expected," *The Inyo Independent*, October 10, 1874, 3; "Getting Ready for Work," *The Inyo Independent*, October 17, 1874, 3; "Personals," *The Inyo Independent*, December 12, 1874, 3.

<sup>376</sup> "A Look Ahead," *The Inyo Independent*, February 21, 1873, 2.

<sup>377</sup> "Local Affairs," *The Inyo Independent*, June 29, 1872, 2.

are expected here in a few days,” they noted on another occasion; “We learn indirectly that his Waucoba Company do not propose active operations this winter,” they stated the following winter, the awkward phrasing of “learn indirectly” suggesting that they had come upon this information outside of their customary reporting channels, perhaps thirdhand—not through Brady, but through someone who knew him and who passed on the information to the paper.<sup>378</sup> On occasion, the editors admitted that they simply did not know what Brady was up to. In November of 1875, for example, a short article stated that “little has been heard of this promi-i-ing [sic] district for some time.”<sup>379</sup> These repeated qualifiers and references to sources reminded readers that the editors were relying on accounts provided by others, which in turn signaled that knowledge of the district was not widely available. This is not to say that *The Independent* covered Brady’s mines with skepticism. Even as they admitted that they knew little about what Brady was up to, the editors of *The Independent* repeatedly and enthusiastically emphasized the district’s enormous and seemingly unparalleled potential.

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<sup>378</sup> “Sale of Mining Property,” October 10, 1874, 3; “Personals,” December 12, 1874, 3. Sometimes, information about the district was packaged as rumor. A few months after Senator Jones’ pack trip a short notice read: “it is rumored that a number of the most important mines of the Waucoba district are to be consolidated.” “Waucoba,” *The Inyo Independent*, October 5, 1872, 1.

<sup>379</sup> “Waucoba” *The Inyo Independent*, November 13, 1875, 3. Sometimes, the paper issued corrections on behalf of Brady. In a notable instance, its editors backpedaled after publishing an article that implied that Egbert and Haskell’s pack trip with Senator Jones had not been a serious prospecting expedition. The initial report of the pack trip, written by an editor who had not accompanied it, implied that the trip was a leisurely excursion accompanied by a substantial amount of whiskey. Egbert and Haskell were evidently displeased with this characterization, for the following week, the paper published a revised account and acknowledged that they had misrepresented the nature of the excursion. “Local Affairs - Waucoba,” *The Inyo Independent*, November 16, 1872, 3.

Much like how mining prospectuses for operations along the Front Range of Colorado framed a lack of geological knowledge as a signifier of immanently obtainable wealth, *The Independent* cast their inability to obtain firsthand knowledge as a signifier of their credibility, of their access to authentic sources. Put differently, the local press portrayed the district as the domain of a few privileged insiders who had claimed profitable but as yet unknown space, and who might be looking to bring additional investors into the fold. Investing amidst this booster rhetoric, Bierstadt involved himself, much as he had in the Rockies in 1863, in a region grappling with the challenge of obtaining information about the value of underground spaces.

### **Betting on Fragments**

The inability of the local press to obtain firsthand information—and their efforts to spin this inability—raises the question of what types of information Bierstadt would have had as a company co-director. Unfortunately, the full extent of Bierstadt's involvement in the Waucoba Company is somewhat difficult to track, due to the scarcity of his surviving correspondence. What is clear, however, is that he was a continent away for the bulk of the company's existence and that he seems to have had little to no involvement in day to day operations. In fact, it is not clear whether Brady and Bierstadt ever met, or whether Egbert served as their middleman. He was in New York City when articles of incorporation were filed for the Waucoba Company, having left San Francisco in the late fall of 1872, and he did not attend the company's first quarterly directors' meeting, which took place the following February.<sup>380</sup> He did

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<sup>380</sup> On the existence of these meetings, see "Notice of meeting of Stockholders," *The Inyo Independent*, February 22, 1873, 2. *The Independent* published weekly lists of

return to Owens Valley in April of 1873, his fourth and final visit to the valley during the decade, but there is nothing to indicate that he trekked across the Inyos to the Waucoba district. Instead, Egbert took him on a tour of the nearby Cerro Gordo mines, a short and easy ride from his hotel in the town of Independence.<sup>381</sup> The extent of Bierstadt's involvement in the Waucoba Company after this trip is unclear. Whatever dealings he had with Egbert or Brady in 1874 have been lost.

His apparent lack of involvement in Waucoba Company suggests that he did little more than extend credit to kickstart the operation. After making his initial investment, he left for New York, where he watched the company's progress from afar. From this vantage point a continent away, he looked for opportunities to expand his landholdings in the Inyos. Specifically, he waited for tips passed on to him by his partners still in Owens Valley, tips that would allow him to make speculative acquisitions of potentially lucrative mining lands.

This network of speculative land dealing is encapsulated in an 1875 letter that Bierstadt wrote to William Stoddard. According to the letter, at some point in 1875 Bierstadt came into possession of a tracing of a map showing a location somewhere in the Inyos. The location to which the tracing referred is a mystery. Bierstadt himself did not seem to know for certain. "I gave it to my friend Major Egbert," he explained to William Stoddard; "he tried his best to discover the lost property it referred to," but

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visitors to the only hotel in the valley, the American Hotel. When the director's meetings took place, Bierstadt was not listed among the guests.

<sup>381</sup> The paper stated that "Egbert, always looking for an excuse to prospect or visit the mining areas, took Bierstadt to Cerro Gordo." "Local Affairs," *The Inyo Independent*, May 3, 1873, 3.

apparently to no avail.<sup>382</sup> Nonetheless, the tracing reportedly identified a promising real estate opportunity—so promising that Bierstadt suggested investing in the land before Egbert even verified the location. “I can put [in] \$5,000,” he proposed, “and double it in three months.”<sup>383</sup> The letter is the only piece of his conversation with Stoddard that survives, so it is unclear whether Stoddard joined in the investment, whether Egbert successfully located the property, or whether Bierstadt even followed through on his plan. But although the tracing and the topographic information that it contained are lost, the letter sheds light on how Bierstadt encountered and experienced Inyo space while he was living on the East Coast in the mid-1870s.

In particular, the letter indicates that his eagerness to “put \$5,000” was not contingent upon his firsthand observation of the site or upon the delivery of accurate cartographic knowledge. He was willing—eager even—to bet a significant sum of money on a tracing of a map whose location he did not know. He was comfortable

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<sup>382</sup> Albert Bierstadt to William O. Stoddard, August 19, 1875, Joseph Downs Collection of Manuscripts & Printed Ephemera, Winterthur Archives, Winterthur Library. It is unclear exactly why Bierstadt chose to write Stoddard at this time, although it may have had something to do with a short-lived rumor that a railroad would soon be built between Owens Valley and Los Angeles. In the summer of 1875, one of Bierstadt’s patrons, the United States Senator Jon P. Jones, co-founded the Los Angeles and Independence Railroad Company, which planned to build a line connecting the two cities. “Articles of Incorporation,” *The Inyo Independent*, January 15, 1875, 2. The railroad was never built. Senator Jones transferred ownership of the corporation to the Central Pacific Railroad after completing preliminary surveys. The Central Pacific chose not to extend the line up to Owens Valley. “Sold Again,” *The Inyo Independent*, June 2, 1878, 3. However, the timing is still suspect. Bierstadt wrote Stoddard more than two months after California newspapers reported that the railroad would not be built. Either Bierstadt was woefully out of touch or his prospective land deal was unrelated to the railroad.

<sup>383</sup> Bierstadt to Stoddard, August 19, 1875.

investing from a distance, blindly. This is a key point, given that Bierstadt is often cast as someone whose relationship to the West hinged on his firsthand encounters travelling and exploring out West. Bierstadt's unverified tracing is a vestige of a different form of encounter, one shaped in and through the mediating presence of finance capital and cartographic representations.

Likewise, Bierstadt's paintings materialize a particular stage in the social life of mining land, a step in such land's transformation into an exchangeable commodity. As described previously in this study, in order for real estate to become an exchangeable commodity, it must be rendered transmissible or mobile through an act of representation.<sup>384</sup> Something—a property title, a claim map, a survey report, a deed—must circulate in its place. How the land is represented will define who has access to it, how easily it can be bought or sold, or other factors that might influence how it circulates on the market.<sup>385</sup> In short, how land is represented as real estate will determine the extent to which it can be commodified.

Considered in this light, Bierstadt's tracing was valuable to the artist for reasons not limited to its identificatory, orienting function (especially given that Bierstadt expressed his willingness to invest before learning the property's precise

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<sup>384</sup> In linking the tracing's significance to its social life, I draw from Martin Brückner, *The Social Life of Maps in America, 1750-1860* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), especially 6-7. On the relationship between the social life of real estate and the legibility and transmissibility of land as exchangeable property, see the introduction to this study, which draws from Alexia Yates, *Selling Paris: Property and Commercial Culture in the Fin-de-siècle Capital* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>385</sup> For more on this point see Yates, *Selling Paris*, 12-14.

location). The tracing's status as unverified may have itself been important, for it marked the as yet unlocated space as known only to a select few. Put differently, the tracing was an insider tip, the private and tacit knowledge of a select few. Someone, somewhere, learned of a promising mining property and passed it into the orbit of an exclusive professional network that Bierstadt trusted to locate, claim, and develop promising mining properties. What the document signified, then, was not just a topographic referent in the Inyos, but the tracing's broader social life, its circulation within broader networks of social, economic, and cultural exchange. The depicted site would eventually have to be found for the tracing to become a profitable tip, but in order for the site to have meaning and importance, it first had to be represented as claimable property within the context of a select group. In this context, transmissibility was a precondition for legibility.

The question that emerges is how this unverified cartographic document might illuminate understandings of the peculiar picture-subject relationship in *Mount Corcoran*. At first, the tracing and painting seem radically different, unrelated. Unlike the tracing, which was likely small, schematic, and circulated among a select group, Bierstadt's eight-foot-wide landscape is monumental, replete with visual detail, and displayed in a public setting. Yet there are representational affinities between the two. For one, much like the tracing, *Mount Corcoran* traffics in a rhetoric of partial legibility. It offers a tantalizing fragment of space, a fragment meant to spark fantasies of possession from the subject position of the speculator. The following section takes this argument further, but considering representational parallels between *Mount Corcoran* and cartography.

### ***Mount Corcoran and Cartographic Space***

Illuminated through a gap in the afternoon storm clouds, *Mount Corcoran's* waterfall catches the eye from across the gallery, competing with the mountain peak for the viewer's attention (fig. 4.11). Curiously, in a composition saturated with visual information, the falls are isolated. Tracing them upward to their source, the terrain vanishes into impenetrable shadows. To the right, Bierstadt provides only a broad passage of inscrutable darkness. For all of the picture's grandeur, the middle ground of Mount Corcoran lends only small fragments for visual contemplation, as if the scene had been only partially available for transcription. The waterfall's sudden emergence from this semi-concealed space also lends a temporal dimension: it is as if a parcel of Western space has just become visible and accessible to the viewer, creating a momentary opportunity for contemplation.

Previously, I proposed that in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* passages of inscrutable space functioned to signal the presence of an epistemological limit, particularly when paired with certain perspectival distortions. In this former picture, inscrutable space signals that the value of the depicted scene stems from a subterranean realm that cannot be translated easily into representation. *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains* manifests a certain anxiety toward this possibility, a querying of how one should imagine or perceive a landscape whose value no longer seems clearly evident on the surface. This dynamic was evident in the picture's narrative content, specifically in its depiction of the abruptly abandoned campsite, and in the spatial organization of the foreground, with a vertiginous plunge that destabilizes the viewer's customary prospect view (fig. 4.12).

*Mount Corcoran* also traffics in this visual rhetoric, but, unlike *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, the picture does not register anxiety toward the unknowability of



the subterranean. For one, the narrative intensity of the picture is lessened. The only action is a black bear ambling out of the woods. And in contrast to the quickly encroaching darkness of *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, a cool, diffuse light suffuses the majority of the scene. There are impenetrable shadows and they are prominently placed; however, they occupy only a narrow band between the middle ground and the far distance. They share equal weight with the bright strip of sunlit terrain nearby. Furthermore, it is not entirely clear whether the storm is advancing or receding; the hard-edged cloud forms have a solidity that arrests any implied movement.<sup>386</sup> The picture still presents mountain terrain that is largely inscrutable and inaccessible, but there is no longer an accompanying sense of developing threat. Unknown space no longer carries the weight of an epistemological crisis.

Furthermore, inscrutable space addresses itself differently to the viewer than in *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*. In the earlier picture, narrative and spatial elements highlight the challenges of discerning the contents of mining land while standing within it, and this was achieved through a composition that interacts with and disrupts the viewer's figurative occupation of the foreground plane. In contrast, the compositional organization of *Mount Corcoran* has more in common with *Among the Sierra Nevada*, in which a shallow, wall-like compositional space prevents imaginative entry into the depicted scene. Those who imaginatively step onto this foreground plane will soon find themselves walled in, confined to the lower right zone of the picture. The lake spans the entirety of the composition and the nearby forest forms an impenetrable screen, leaving no traversal path from foreground to

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<sup>386</sup> Within the gallery space, the white highlights catch small shadows, rendering them almost in relief.

background. Consequently, the storm clouds are taken in at a distance. Positioned so far away, and relatively low to the ground, the juxtaposed passages of legible and illegible topography function as an object of contemplation, not an overarching environmental state.

Given this shift in mode of address, *Mount Corcoran* appears to mark the unknowability of western space when such space is mediated through cartography—as opposed to its unknowability when experienced firsthand, as in *Storm in the Rocky Mountains*. As such, the picture registers not only the literal distance separating the viewer from the subject in reality—a topic addressed in Chapter Two—but also the forms of representation that circulated across these distances, the forms that made mining land transmissible as real estate. In this context, unknowability reads less as an unbridgeable limit, and rather a signifier of land’s value within the context of an elite group.

Fragments of archival evidence suggest that during the mid-1870s and into the 1880s, Bierstadt’s experience of western space was mediated in a significant way by cartography. In addition to Bierstadt’s reference to Egbert’s tracing, an 1881 letter from the painter to Henry Villard, then the president of the Canadian Pacific Railway, suggests that Bierstadt’s speculative investments and his painting practice took place in the same physical space. “My studio has become such a land office,” Bierstadt wrote to Villard, “that I have about concluded to invite you to occupy the adjoining rooms. If you cannot do that send me some maps. This will to some extent satisfy this demand for lands.”<sup>387</sup> Villard’s reply does not survive, but Bierstadt’s letter suggests

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<sup>387</sup> Albert Bierstadt to Henry Villard, ca. 1881, Henry Villard Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Am 1322, Box 1, Folder 28. Bierstadt was seeking to

that his landscape paintings were just one form of topographic representation evident in Bierstadt's studio; maps were close at hand, and they facilitated the land deals that took place alongside his easel.

Given the presence of maps in his studio, perhaps the passages of inscrutable topography in *Mount Corcoran* offer a suggestive parallel to the blank spaces that often appear in topographic maps of the western United States. Such blank spaces have historically incited acquisitive fantasizes within the context of American and European imperialism, with Marlowe's rumination on blank spaces in maps of Africa in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) being the most infamous example.<sup>388</sup> On one level, blanks justify expropriation by marking unmapped space as empty, unoccupied, and thus freely available for possession. On another, such blanks mark spaces as not yet known, erasing or suppressing forms of knowledge external to the cartographic system and the imperial project that it takes part in.<sup>389</sup> Furthermore, blank spaces figure in cartography's logic of generalization, in which certain

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acquire land along proposed railway routes for the Canadian Pacific. Alan Pringle, "Albert Bierstadt in Canada," *The American Art Journal* 17 (Winter 1985): 9.

<sup>388</sup> "Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look in for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say: When I grow up I will go there." Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Kimbrough, Norton Critical Edition, 3rd Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), 11.

<sup>389</sup> For a useful introduction to the role of blank space in early American maps, see John Brian Harley, "New England Cartography and Native Americans," in *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, ed. Paul Laxton (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 187-190.

topographic features are given extra prominence, while other elements of the scene are suppressed—a dynamic that draws out certain features of the landscape that harbor symbolic or economic resonance for a particular group.<sup>390</sup> More recent studies of cartography have broadened understandings of the role of blank space in the social lives of maps. Blank or radically simplified spaces also work to construct a particular subject position on the part of map bearers, often by rendering cartographic knowledge tacit and thus dependent on verbal articulation by the map bearer (or bearers).<sup>391</sup> The mode of address implies an active process of self-identification between the viewer and the depicted terrain, one that often touches on issues of nationalism, individual memory, statehood, and other factors.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Margin Berger, *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 52-58.

<sup>391</sup> Martin Brückner, for instance, has noted how in early American pocket maps extreme generalization in depictions of topography—extreme to the point that the pocket map itself was of questionable utility as an orienting device—functioned as a form of tacit knowledge, relying on the memory of the map bearer for activation. In this context, the map object produces cartographic knowledge by creating the conditions for an interpersonal performance. Martin Brückner, *The Social Life of Maps* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, in association with the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2017), 298-299. For more on the social interactions that took place in front of maps, see Brückner, “The Spectacle of Maps in British America, 1750-1800,” *Early American Cartographies*, ed. idem. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, in association with the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2011), 389-441.

<sup>392</sup> Brückner, *The Social Life of Maps*, 302. As an anecdotal aside, I have observed that Bierstadt’s landscapes incite performances of topographic knowledge from present-day viewers. Confronted with certain spatial impossibilities in Bierstadt’s paintings, viewers often draw from their own experiences of a place to “correct” the topographic rendering evident in the picture, describing to each other how a certain place “actually” looks from the point of view suggested by the picture’s foreground.

Perhaps the blank spaces in *Mount Corcoran* offer a painted parallel to a certain social life of cartography: the insider tip. If *Mount Corcoran* harbors within itself elements of a cartographic aesthetic, it is that of the fragmentary tracing passed among a select group rather than the rigorously and scientifically produced survey map. Read in this light, what is notable about *Mount Corcoran* that its depicted space is unchartable within the logic of Cartesian perspective. The distance between the foreground vantage and the sunlit strip is rationally incoherent, in part because the enormity of the nearby trees throws off a reliable sense of proportion and scale, as does the central waterfall, which seems simultaneously miniscule relative to the foreground and enormous relative to its immediate surroundings. In its lack of a totalizing spatial rationality, *Mount Corcoran* echoes a rudimentary cartographic representation, in which a set of key topographic features—trees, mountain streams, and water, have been blocked out as visual and symbolic landmarks, but without mathematical coordination in terms of distance.<sup>393</sup> Offering an appealing glimpse of remote mountain topography, the picture does not locate this parcel of land within a readable spatial logic.

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<sup>393</sup> In this sense, I am reluctant to read the cartographic affinities in *Mount Corcoran* too closely with the production of maps within the context of state surveys. In their conspicuous lack of spatial coherence, Bierstadt's pictures seem to flout the measuring impulse evident in topographic draftsmanship, in which a theodolite and plane table would be used to facilitate the precise translation of a real view into a two-dimensional panoramic representation. Furthermore, as noted previously, although Bierstadt travelled with King and Whitney in the Sierras, the extent of his interest in the actual work of surveying is unclear. In 1871, he turned down an opportunity to join Ferdinand Vandeveer Hayden's Geological Survey, opening the door for the young landscape painter Thomas Moran to take part.

*Mount Corcoran* thus dramatizes the experience of gaining privileged access to a fragmentary representation of an otherwise uncharted space. In this sense, it depicts a parcel of land that has not yet been coordinated into a system of rationalized topographic depiction, one associated with the authority of the state. Consequently, the picture offers each of its viewers a fantasy of something privately and exclusively known.

Furthermore, the process of viewing *Mount Corcoran* thus consists of a certain scaling-down of nature—its distillation into a form resembling that of a not-yet-verified tip or similar fragment of information. In other words, the interchange between viewer and fragmented middle ground stands in for the professional collaborations that facilitated Bierstadt's attempts to discern the value of Western space from vague, incomplete representations and evanescent fragments of information. In *Mount Corcoran*, passages of inscrutability no longer signal an ominous epistemological limit; rather, they speak to a social life of real estate, one closely linked to the circulation of topographic information about little-known locales.

Considered in this light, *Mount Corcoran* appears at odds with the broader representational aims of the CSGS. Yet the competing sensibility that the picture offers harbors no form of critique toward the CSGS or the imperialist gains that it helped to consolidate. Given Bierstadt's wholehearted embrace of speculation, this is perhaps unsurprising. Nonetheless, Bierstadt's acritical approach underscores the gap separating him from those survey image makers who contested and resisted the representational modes that erased or elided the unsavory aspects of western expansion. In an insightful reinterpretation of the photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan, the famed photographer of Clarence King's and George Wheeler's

western surveys, Robin Kelsey contends that O’Sullivan’s pictures bear latent traces of his “determination to represent the labor of mining” in the face of archives bent on preserving labor’s invisibility.<sup>394</sup> No such oppositional project surfaces in *Mount Corcoran*. Rather, the picture treats the lacunae of the survey archive as opportunities for profit. Functioning analogously to the insider tip, *Mount Corcoran* offers viewers a fantasy of beating the survey to the punch.<sup>395</sup>

### **Mount Corcoran as a Non-Naturalistic Depiction**

The question still remains of how *Mount Corcoran* manages to function as a depiction of a real place, given the retroactive selection of its subject. To answer this, it is necessary to shift attention from what the picture affords its viewers to what the picture afforded its maker. In his efforts to sell the picture to William Corcoran,

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<sup>394</sup> Robin Kelsey, *Archive Style: Photographs & Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850–1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 128; cf. Jurovics, *Reading the West*, 230, n. 8.

<sup>395</sup> If there is a parallel to Bierstadt’s approach amongst survey photographers of the nineteenth-century, it is the little-known Minnesota photographer William Henry Illingworth (1844–1893). Illingworth accompanied General George Armstrong Custer’s 1874 expedition to the Black Hills of present-day South Dakota, then an established Lakota Sioux reservation. Although contracted to produce a series of stereographs for the federal government, Illingworth refused to deliver his finished pictures to his supervisors following the expedition. Instead, he sold his pictures privately out of his Saint Paul, Minnesota studio, engaging a regional audience that was fiercely opposed to federal protection of Sioux lands. As I have argued elsewhere, Illingworth created his pictures with this private audience in mind, rather than the interests of his federal superiors, and he portrayed the Black Hills as a space devoid of federal oversight and ideal for settlement and mining. Spencer Wigmore, “Custer’s Black Hills Exhibition: Landscape Stereography, and the Dilemma of Federal Oversight” (paper presented at New Perspectives in Native American Art and Art of the American West, University of Oklahoma School of Art and Art History, Norman, OK, Sept. 5, 2014).

Bierstadt would delegate the evidentiary proof of his picture's status as a depiction of a real place to cartography. To accommodate this move, he crafted a composition that anticipated its future transformation into a depiction of a real place. In short, Bierstadt created the painted equivalent to claimable real estate.

The picture's unique relationship to its denoted subject stems from one of the more glaring issues with *Mount Corcoran*: it does not look all that much like its denoted subject. Whereas the painting shows a single mountain in isolation, its sharp crest rising above the clouds, the real mountain shares the range with a tight cluster of peaks. Its actual, knob-like contour does little to distinguish it from its peers when seen from Owens Valley (fig. 4.13). Granted, certain pictorial details bear a loose visual resemblance to the east face of Mount Corcoran. Just to the right of the peak, for example, a small saddle culminates in a sharp crenellation—Bierstadt's painting includes a similar feature (figs 4.14-15). Additionally, the snow-capped plateau that is evident just below the real peak bears a loose resemblance to the bowl-like depression in Bierstadt's painting—at least to an extent—and the dispersal of snowfall matches as well. Today there is no longer a lake in Owens Valley—it was drained in the early twentieth century to support the Los Angeles Aqueduct—but in the nineteenth century, a broad expanse of water would have been evident on the valley floor, creating an additional potential referent for the picture.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> On the draining of Owens Lake, see William L. Kahrl, *Water and Power: The Conflict Over Los Angeles' Water Supply in the Owens Valley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Mark Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and its Disappearing Water* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 59-94.



But this exercise is suspect, given that Bierstadt did not specify which side of Mount Corcoran his painting represented—or if he did, this material is missing from the archive. His presence in Owens Valley is of course firmly established, and the existence of at least one study, *Sunrise in the Sierras* (fig. 4.16), indicates that he painted the east face of the Sierras while there—indeed, there is a suggestive affinity between the sawtooth peaks of Bierstadt’s early morning sketch and the lower cliff in *Mount Corcoran*.<sup>397</sup> But he also ventured into the High Sierras with Clarence King, who was quite familiar with Mount Corcoran, having climbed it in 1871 while mistakenly believing it was Mount Whitney. The archive does not conclusively prove that Bierstadt visited Mount Corcoran with King, but it is plausible that they would have done so.

With these travels in mind, one could carry out a similar comparative exercise for the west face of Mount Corcoran, as seen from within the High Sierras. For example, to the left of the real peak there is a small cliff, to the right there is a smaller crest that punctuates the horizon (fig. 4.17). Both of these features frame the edges of the background of Bierstadt’s landscape. One might also point to the small mountain lake (now known as Cottonwood Lake) and the pine forest nestled beneath the slope—a lake and forest figure prominently in the picture’s fore and middle ground. There is still the question of the peak’s contours, though, for they do not match. The real Mount Corcoran resembles a pair of sloped beams tipped onto a bulbous mass. In

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<sup>397</sup> Furthermore, a small sketch in the Oakland Museum, *Owens Valley, California* (ca. 1872-73) indicates that when Bierstadt ventured into the Cerro Gordo district of the Inyo Mountains, he portrayed the view of the Sierras as seen from across the valley.

contrast, *Mount Corcoran* offers a much sharper profile. But perhaps this was a deliberate alteration. Maybe Bierstadt chose to compress the breadth of this particular view and enhance its verticality, thereby intensifying its dramatic impact. But he could have just as easily done this to the east face. These resemblances feel equally tenuous.

The peak itself does not bear enough of a resemblance to either face to feel persuasive as a naturalistic transcription. Moreover, is it possible to state with confidence that this painting bears a stronger visual resemblance to Mount Corcoran than any of the other peaks that are clustered nearby? One could just as easily highlight resemblances to the west face of Mount Whitney (fig. 4.18), a peak that Bierstadt painted on at least one other occasion.<sup>398</sup> And if the painting is an aggregation of details taken from multiple viewpoints rather than the reproduction of a single view, it is impossible to state definitively that the aggregation is based solely on the features of Mount Corcoran.<sup>399</sup> One could argue that Bierstadt had merely recycled compositional motifs from any number of his large-scale landscapes, which often show centralized peaks rising precipitously above a mountain lake flanked by pines and redwoods. *Mount Corcoran* seems plausibly naturalistic, but not definitively so. There are too many competing referents. The painting seems eager to affix itself to a potential subject, yet reluctant to commit fully to its role as a depiction of a specific viewshed.

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<sup>398</sup> See, for example, *Mount Whitney* (1877), in the collection of the Rockwell Museum in Corning, New York.

<sup>399</sup> For instance, Bierstadt's *Mount Whitney* includes a bluff taken from his previous picture, *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California*, which was in turn taken from Bierstadt's many pictures of Yosemite Valley.

Notably, the nineteenth-century staff at the Corcoran Gallery of Art picked up on the slipperiness of the picture's naturalism. William Corcoran's curator, William MacLeod, was skeptical of Bierstadt's claim that the picture depicted a real Sierra Peak. He assumed (rightly, in this instance), that Bierstadt had repurposed a previous work and changed its subject.<sup>400</sup> And after learning that Bierstadt had gone to the War Department to name a peak after his painting, MacLeod asked for corroborating verification from the United States Geological Survey (USGS). He then invited General John B. Frisbie, then the vice president of the California Pacific Railroad, to assess the picture's veracity. Frisbie found it "faithful in every respect," but MacLeod was evidently not satisfied.<sup>401</sup> Soon after, he solicited a second opinion from Major John Wesley Powell, who was then several years removed from his famed expeditions along the Colorado River. Powell liked the picture, but found it "not truthful in form of the mountain—too much of a precipice."<sup>402</sup> It is not clear whether MacLeod ever accepted the picture as a portrayal of Mount Corcoran. And perhaps his efforts to do so were moot, for soon after acquiring the picture, William Corcoran took to

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<sup>400</sup> However, MacLeod was mistaken in that he thought that Bierstadt had repurposed a painting of Mount Hood to serve as Mount Corcoran. He did not realize that the picture was *Mountain Lake*, and that it had recently returned from the National Academy of Design's annual exhibition. Cash, "Mount Corcoran," 140.

<sup>401</sup> William MacLeod Curator's Journal, 1877, digital typescript of original manuscript, George Washington University, 99, [https://archive.org/details/corc\\_macleodjournaltrans1877/page/n97](https://archive.org/details/corc_macleodjournaltrans1877/page/n97), last accessed 10/29/19.

<sup>402</sup> William MacLeod Curator's Journal, 1878, digital typescript of original manuscript, George Washington University, 4, [https://archive.org/details/corc\\_macleodjournaltrans1878/page/n3](https://archive.org/details/corc_macleodjournaltrans1878/page/n3), last accessed 10/29/19.

describing the work as a “Rocky Mountain Scene,” indicting not only the looseness of the picture-subject relationship, but the manner in which the picture’s subject seemed a function of ownership. The identity of the picture’s content was contingent upon the whims of the owner, not the actual topographic features of a site in nature.<sup>403</sup>

Furthermore, it is notable that MacLeod tried to verify the picture’s subject as if it were a property dispute. When he contacted the USGS, MacLeod sought to confirm not only that the peak in question actually existed, but that Bierstadt’s claim over its title was legitimate. In this case the picture’s veracity rested not merely on its visual resemblance to the site in question, but on Bierstadt’s relationship to the legitimating bureaucracy of the federal survey.<sup>404</sup> Thus, the picture’s veracity, for MacLeod, hinged to some degree on whether Bierstadt had gone through the appropriate channels when naming his mountain. Here, the picture-subject relationship—and the picture’s signifying capacity—finds itself hinging on the legitimacy of something quite similar to a real estate transaction.

With this in mind, a second, complementary reading of Bierstadt’s approach to topographic depiction becomes possible. In addition to evoking for viewers the social life of insider information, the composition of *Mount Corcoran* works to preserve its own potential exchangeability as a commodity good. It does so by offering its viewers

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<sup>403</sup> Cash, “Mount Corcoran,” 140.

<sup>404</sup> Seen in this light, Bierstadt’s painting offers a unique example of Alan Trachtenberg’s concept of “naming the view.” Naming an image or an actual place, Trachtenberg emphasizes, should be conceived of as an act of possession, an act that seeks to acquire its object by superimposing onto it a particular set of values, forms of knowledge, and cultural aspirations. Alan Trachtenberg, “Naming the View,” in *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*, ed. idem. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 119-163.

a simulacrum of a real place. *Mount Corcoran* is plausibly naturalistic, but not actually so. It is a picture whose topographic features were not the result of an act of naturalistic transcription, but an aggregation of schematic motifs selected for their potential to function as iconic signifiers when called upon. Bierstadt did not set out to paint the peak that would become known as Mount Corcoran; rather, he set out to produce a picture that could depict whatever mountain he wanted, whenever he needed it to. The rudimentary character of the picture's topographic forms retains the potential exchangeability of their referents, as is evidenced by William Corcoran's subsequent description of the picture of a Rocky Mountain scene. In this dynamic, the picture's tie to place is distilled to the easily exchangeable form of a property title, to a mere act of naming.

### **The Failure of the Waucoba Mining and Smelting Company**

There is an environmental assumption underlying Bierstadt's decision to fix a picture's subject through the cartographic logic of a land claim. *Mount Corcoran* envisions a fantasy of land dematerialized into a freely circulating commodity—a speculator's utopia of purely exchangeable space, space that offers no material or environmental resistance to its possessor's estimations of wealth. To have value and meaning, nature need only to appear claimable to the right people.

This was not the reality on the ground, though. At the moment when Bierstadt was discussing with Stoddard the offer to invest a further \$5,000 into the Waucoba district, mines in the district were beginning to fail. Signs of discontent had surfaced the previous summer. In July of 1874, *The Independent* lamented that “times in Inyo

just now are as dull or duller than they have been for years.”<sup>405</sup> The problem was a lack of capital. Investors were increasingly unwilling to extend credit to such a remote and rugged area. As a result, work in the Waucoba district slowed to a crawl. Even Brady seems to have abandoned the district. A month before Bierstadt wrote Stoddard to encourage him to invest, Brady had embarked on a new drilling operation in Cerro Gordo.<sup>406</sup> Following this, Brady’s whereabouts are unclear. After 1876, his name no longer appears in *The Independent*. And in 1875, Egbert and Haskell were both reassigned from Camp Independence.<sup>407</sup>

Living in New York, Bierstadt was seemingly oblivious to these developments. Entirely reliant on tips, tracings, and letters sent to him by his partners in the valley, he was unaware that his speculative fantasies were crashing on the unyielding Inyo terrain. And he remained unaware for several more years. When he did learn finally learn of the failure of his investment, he embarked on one last ditch effort to profit from the Inyos, an effort that illustrates not only the depth of his fantasies of speculative wealth, but his true legacy as a painter of the American West.

Bierstadt’s 1880 letter to General William Tecumseh Sherman—the letter than opened this study—marks the start of his last attempt to wring profit out of the Inyo Mountains. In this letter, Bierstadt explained that he had previously loaned money for an investment in an Inyo mining property, and that his partners in the scheme were

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<sup>405</sup> “Bull Times and the Remedy,” *The Inyo Independent*, July 11, 1874, 2.

<sup>406</sup> “The Posted Tunnel,” *The Inyo Independent*, April 17, 1875, 3.

<sup>407</sup> “Local Affairs,” *The Inyo Independent*, November 30, 1875, 3; “Local Affairs,” *The Inyo Independent*, January 15, 1876, 3.

now trying to sell the property without acknowledging his stake in it.<sup>408</sup> It is unknown whether Sherman ever fulfilled Bierstadt's request to stop the sale, or whether the deal ever went through. Nonetheless, Bierstadt was back on the Inyo land market less than two months after writing the General. This time, he was working to buy up derelict Waucoba Company lands. He was doing so without Harry Clay Egbert or James Brady, both of whom had abandoned the Waucoba district (and Owens Valley) several years prior.<sup>409</sup> Still living in New York, Bierstadt relied on a new proxy: W. C. Chapin, a New York based mining engineer and well digger. Chapin had spent the winter in the east Inyos, "examining in deep snow the various mines in the Waucoba District belonging to the old Waucoba Mining Company."<sup>410</sup> In March, Chapin filed a series of mining claims in the district on behalf of Bierstadt, as well as Bierstadt's brothers Charles and Edward, Bierstadt's son Oliver, and John Hewston, Jr, one of the original co-directors of the Waucoba Mining and Smelting Company. Chapin filed nine claims in total, most of which were in the vicinity of Whippoorwill Flat, a juniper

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<sup>408</sup> Albert Bierstadt to General William Tecumseh Sherman, January 20, 1880, Gordon Hendricks Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Box 20, Folder 3.

<sup>409</sup> Egbert continued to serve in the military until 1899, when he was killed in action in the Philippine-American War. Brady's whereabouts after leaving Owens Valley are unknown.

<sup>410</sup> "Waucoba," *The Inyo Independent*, March 27, 1880, 2.

woodland in the northeastern corner of the Waucoba district.<sup>411</sup> Six of the claims were listed as part of a new venture, the “Silver Quartz Mining Co.”<sup>412</sup>

Chapin’s claim filings led to a brief revival of activity in the district. By the summer, “a small force” was reportedly at work at the Summit mine in the Waucoba district, which *The Inyo Independent* (hereafter *The Independent*) stated was “owned principally by Alfred [sic] Bierstadt, the renowned artist.”<sup>413</sup> Through the fall and winter of 1881-82, *The Independent* offered sporadic updates, noting that a “recently organized New York Company” was intent on buying up old Waucoba Company mines and equipment, and that its operators had shipped a small quantity of ore to New York for assaying.<sup>414</sup> In the midst of these developments, *The Independent* still discussed the district in terms of its previous struggles, pointing out that the former

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<sup>411</sup> Inyo County, Calif., Mining Claim Filings, March 5, 10, 18, 25, 1880, Office of the Inyo County Clerk Recorder, Independence, CA. Seven of the nine claims were for old Waucoba Company mines. The eighth marked a new mining site, and the ninth established a new mill site. I am grateful to Kammi Foote, the Inyo County Clerk-Recorder & Registrar of Voters, for locating these claim records for me. Without these claim filings, Bierstadt’s mining activities in the 1880s would remain undiscovered.

<sup>412</sup> Curiously, the name Silver Quartz Mining Company does not appear in *The Inyo Independent*. The only usage of this name in publicly available documents appeared in 1882, when a government report stated that a newly constructed shaft at the Summit Mine was part of the Silver Quartz Mining Company’s holdings. Department of the Treasury, *Report of the Director of the Mint upon the Statistics of the Production of the Precious Metals of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1882), 39.

<sup>413</sup> “Waucoba,” *The Inyo Independent*, July 24, 1880, 3. Claim records indicate that Chapin was technically the owner of the Summit Mine, not Bierstadt.

<sup>414</sup> These updates are detailed in “Waucoba,” *The Inyo Independent*, October 22, 1881, 3; “Waucoba,” *The Inyo Independent*, December 3, 1881, 3; “For Waucoba,” *The Inyo Independent*, February 18, 1882, 3.



Waucoba Company had spent “considerable money building trails and making a great number of openings on the claims,” and that “a complete mill outfit was hauled in through Silver Peak and Eureka Valley,” but that “at no one point was any depth attained of consequence.”<sup>415</sup>

Chapin’s team held out for one more season. The following March, district miners hired a party of American Indians—most likely displaced Eastern Mono or Western Shoshone who had returned to Owens Valley to work in the mines—to attempt to expand roads running north over the Inyos toward Big Pine.<sup>416</sup> The extent of their progress is unknown; no subsequent news came out of the district until January 1883, when company operators conducted an annual assessment of the various properties. Reporting on the assessment, *The Independent* repeated what had now become a decade-long refrain: “It is much to be hoped that the Company will soon start for the effectual development of their properties in the district.”<sup>417</sup> No such development happened, however.

The district was quiet for the next two years, until the summer of 1885, when Bierstadt returned to Owens Valley. It was his first visit to the region since 1873. Judging by the surviving archive, this was perhaps the only instance during his lifetime that he ventured into the east Inyos. Joined by Chapin, Hewston, and a team of prospectors and scouts, Bierstadt trekked through the Waucoba district and into

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<sup>415</sup> “Waucoba,” *The Inyo Independent*, October 29, 1881, 1.

<sup>416</sup> “From Gospel Swamp,” *The Inyo Independent*, March 4, 1882, 3.

<sup>417</sup> “Waucoba,” *The Inyo Independent*, January 6, 1883, 3.

Saline Valley, an evaporated lakebed southeast of the Waucoba district.<sup>418</sup> When Bierstadt left Owens Valley to return to New York that September, *The Independent* reported that in less than two months, “he will begin work on the mines at Waucoba.”<sup>419</sup> Whether he did so is unknown. Neither Bierstadt nor his partners were ever mentioned in connection with the district again.<sup>420</sup> Following *The Independent*’s announcement, the Waucoba district failed for the final time.<sup>421</sup>

Bierstadt’s involvement with the Inyo Mountains would not come to an end until the 1890s, when they terminated in an English courtroom. The evidence for this is circumstantial, but it seems that at some point Bierstadt embroiled English investors in his plan to revive the district. For in 1893, he was forced to defend himself in a Manchester court against a lawsuit to recover £10,400 in promissory notes given by Bierstadt to a Mr. Schofield, a resident of Manchester, England.<sup>422</sup> *The Morning Post* reported that Schofield had advanced the sum to Bierstadt to develop “mining

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<sup>418</sup> “Personal Mention,” *The Inyo Independent*, July 25, 1885, 3. During the trip, Bierstadt reportedly made sketches of the Sierras overlooking Owens Valley.

<sup>419</sup> “Waucoba Mines,” *The Inyo Independent*, September 12, 1885, 3.

<sup>420</sup> The final reference to any type of mining activity in the district was in 1887, when *The Independent* reported that a prospector named Rube Spear was evaluating a vein of ore found in the district. “Local News,” *The Inyo Independent*, July 23, 1887, 3.

<sup>421</sup> The final reference to Bierstadt’s mines appeared in 1894, when *The Los Angeles Herald* published an article on life in Inyo County. The article mentioned Bierstadt’s past attempts to mine in the region, writing that “Albert Bierstadt, the well-known artist of New York, spent considerable money upon these mines; but the difficulty of transportation prevented working the mines, and nothing has been done for several years.” “The Beauties of Inyo County, A Section of Southern California Looming Up,” *Los Angeles Herald*, January 1, 1894, 15.

<sup>422</sup> Unfortunately, Schofield’s identity and relation to Bierstadt remains lost.

properties in California,” and that Bierstadt had not paid back the sum.<sup>423</sup> Given the timing of his 1885 effort to revive the Waucoba district, and the fact that no other California mines have surfaced in Bierstadt’s archive, perhaps Schofield’s promissory notes had helped fund the project. After working to cast himself as a transatlantic investor throughout the late-1860s, Bierstadt found himself facing the fallout of such dealings. Two years after the lawsuit, Bierstadt declared bankruptcy. It is unclear to what extent the Waucoba mines were the cause, but they were likely a contributing factor.

### Conclusion

Amidst Bierstadt’s final attempt to revive the defunct Waucoba Company mines, the district itself was finally subjected to a detailed survey, making it possible to pinpoint the approximate present-day location of the mines. In January of 1880, a General Land Office surveyor named L.D. Bond created plat maps of the terrain east of Waucoba Mountain (fig. 4.19). The GLO’s map of the Waucoba district was prepared January 26, 1880—the same time that Chapin was reportedly prospecting in the district. Notably, the map bears a reference to the “Waucoba Company Camp,” marking it at the intersection of Waucoba Canyon and a pack trail leading north

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<sup>423</sup> The court ordered Bierstadt to pay the sum into the court, an apparent precondition to the negotiation of a settlement. “Notices for this Day,” *The Morning Post* (London, UK), July 6, 1893, 2. See also, “Gleanings,” *Birmingham Daily Post* (UK), July 7, 1893, 3 and “Law Notices—This Day,” *The Standard* (London, UK), August 15, 1893, 7. This was not the only legal dispute Bierstadt found himself in during this period. The follow year, a Mr. Ashbury in London sued the artist over another debt—it is not clear whether this debt related to California mines. “The Law Courts,” *The Standard*, July 20, 1894, 2; “Ashbury v. Bierstadt,” *The Times* (London, UK), July 20, 1894, 3.

toward the town of Big Pine (fig. 4.20). Comparisons with Google Earth satellite imagery suggest that the camp was located roughly three quarters of a mile west of Waucoba Saline Road, a county-managed 4x4 connecting road between the northernmost terminus of Saline Valley and Waucoba Mountain (fig. 4.21), suggesting that a future on-site investigation would be feasible.<sup>424</sup> Location descriptions in Chapin's 1880 claim filings suggest that the mines themselves were about three to four miles due north in Whippoorwill Flat, separated from the camp by rough juniper shrubland. Satellite imagery also shows that no significant ruins of mining infrastructure, such as a smelter, remain at the camp location, a possibility that could be confirmed by a site visit. The physical topography of Waucoba district seems to bear few—if any—physical traces of Bierstadt's involvement in it. Whatever capital made its way to the Inyos in the form of mining infrastructure, it has been absorbed back into the arid desert.

The empty Waucoba district, which Bierstadt never painted, and which he may never have seen firsthand, is a relic of a crucial and overlooked aspect of his career. Within that empty space, regional prospectors, Eastern Mono, Western Shoshone, state surveyors, transatlantic financiers, and one landscape painter collided at the intersection of finance capital and the natural environment, a collision that had significant material, economic, and social consequences for all involved. Although

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<sup>424</sup> This is actually a few miles north of where the camp location has historically been understood to be. References to the camp locate it further to the south off of Saline Valley Road, a location that refers instead to a twentieth century saline mining operation that was unrelated to Bierstadt's venture. Scott Bryan and Betty Tucker-Bryan, *The Explorer's Guide to Death Valley National Park*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, University Press of Colorado, 2015), 361.

virtually forgotten, the district's lingering presence in the historic archive serves as a reminder of "the microcosmic aspects of global change our western landscapes and rural villages are undergoing" under the weight of transnational capital flows.<sup>425</sup>

In turn, the relatively unmolested physical topography evidences the capacity of the arid western environment to resist the hubristic sensibilities that govern the marketization of land for extractive purposes, both in the nineteenth century and in the present day. Lost from memory and absorbed back into its environmental surroundings, Bierstadt's Waucoba Company exemplifies the fraught "interplay of ambition and outcome, the collision between simple expectation and complex reality" that Patricia Nelson Limerick highlights as a defining factor in speculators' encounters with the arid West, both past and present.<sup>426</sup> Through his painting practice, Bierstadt worked to align himself with the exploitative forces of transatlantic financial capitalism, but he also fell victim to their underlying environmental assumptions. His grandiose midcareer paintings, which locate the value of western space in its potential transmissibility as real estate, convey an optimistic vision that ultimately ran aground on the arid deserts of Eastern California.

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<sup>425</sup> Lucy Lippard, *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West* (New York: The New Press, 2014), 10.

<sup>426</sup> Patricia Nelson Limerick and Mark Klett, "Haunted by Rhyolite: Learning from the Landscape of Failure," *American Art*, 6, no. 4 (Autumn, 1992): 34.

## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have offered a focused analysis of three of Albert Bierstadt's best-known midcareer landscape paintings—*A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, *Mount Rosalie* (1866), *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (1868), and *Mount Corcoran* (ca. 1876-77)—arguing that they chart a pivotal transformation in his approach to landscape depiction. Over the course of the decade that these three works encompass, Bierstadt devised a novel pictorial style that invited Northeastern and European audiences to value and imagine the distant West as if they were land speculators, a project that was informed by the painter's own forays into speculative land deals in the American West. In his landscape paintings and in his own land dealings, Bierstadt came to locate the cultural, economic, and social value of western space in its potential exchangeability as a real estate.

The stylistic transformation that formed the basis of this study takes the form of a shift in how Bierstadt's paintings addressed period viewers. In Bierstadt's earliest western landscapes—those produced following his first trip West in 1859—Bierstadt correlated the ability to discern the meaning and value of western space to an embodied experience of travel within it. Over the course of this pivotal decade, Bierstadt aligned his paintings with the representational technologies that allowed speculators to bring new spaces into the orbit of speculative finance. He broke from this in his subsequent pictures. In *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, *Mount Rosalie*, narrative and compositional cues call into question the epistemological utility of a

firsthand experience with western space or its inhabitants—a questioning that was informed by his encounters with struggling gold miners in the Rocky Mountains and his experiences working with American Indian performers at the 1864 Metropolitan Sanitary Fair. Bierstadt offered viewers an alternate subject position in *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California*, where exaggerated viewing distances metaphorize a transatlantic encounter with western space, one shaped by transatlantic communicative technologies such as the telegraph. *Mount Corcoran* culminates this shift, building into its compositional logic a social life of cartography that allowed clued in speculators to claim private ownership of mining lands sight unseen, before they became known to a broader public.

The role of communications technologies—such as telegraphy and cartography—in mediating between Bierstadt’s encounter with Western space has been a recurrent theme in this project, and it has shaped how I have conceptualized Bierstadt’s landscapes as acts of depiction. Scholarship on the artist has uncritically privileged the interpretive importance of the time that the artist spent physically travelling through a nonurban West. Yet Bierstadt never saw the Waucoba district, at least not until after spending more than a decade investing in it. Nor did he visit many of the other sites that he chose as objects of speculation across the American and Canadian Wests. These spaces he encountered secondhand, through map tracings and descriptions passed on by trusted partners. Bierstadt’s speculations and landscape paintings were both borne out of a social space intent on capitalizing on evanescent fragments of information, on tips and rumors about potentially profitable locales.

Considered in this light, Bierstadt's paintings reveal the aesthetic malleability of the landscape medium in engaging with the media networks and communicative technologies that reconfigured perceptions of western space during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Although this project has been deliberately narrow in scope, confined to a reexamination of a single canonical American artist, it has aspired to be transatlantic in its reach, illuminating the contours of a transatlantic culture of financial speculation and certain points of intersection between this culture and aesthetic forms. This has led to a revision of Bierstadt's historical positioning within nationalist ideologies of United States expansion; in particular, this study has emphasized how Bierstadt's interest in American Western land speculation was mediated by British interests.

In this respect, future studies of Bierstadt's place within the broader context of Euro-American landscape painting might adopt a comparative approach, tracking the networks of capital that he engaged with to other sites of natural resource extraction around the globe. Notably, several of the British financiers who appeared in this study, such as Sir Morton Peto and Edward Watkin, were also involved in gold mining schemes in Australia. In what ways did Bierstadt's shared aesthetics of landscape painting and speculative finance find a parallel in late nineteenth-century landscape paintings of Australia? Although the core goal of this study has been to offer a new perspective on previously unexamined aspects of Bierstadt's style, a comparative inquiry might offer a more wide-ranging picture of the aesthetic impact of this particular culture of speculative finance.



Furthermore, a comparative approach might lend a more critical perspective toward financial speculation than what Bierstadt's paintings offer. Bierstadt pictured and imagined western space from the narrow subject position of the transatlantic speculator; consequently, his pictures engage only minimally with the politics of labor or the realities of the western environment. In fact, I have proposed that his paintings go so far as to trivialize labor and environment as agents in the production of value and meaning. Although the Waucoba district registers the resistance of the western environment to its marketization, it has been difficult to recover traces of labor in Bierstadt's financial archive. *The Independent* was largely a booster publication in Owens Valley; it devoted more attention to the dynamics of capital than the realities of labor, effacing the identities of those who dug mineshafts, laid roads, or transported ore. A picture of the labor involved in Bierstadt's Waucoba Mining and Smelting Company remains missing.

A project focused exclusively on the imaginings of capital, and not the ways that these imaginings were contested and resisted on the ground, risks offering a distorted picture of financial culture in the nineteenth century.<sup>427</sup> The cultural forces that Bierstadt's paintings exemplified were fiercely contested in the nineteenth

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<sup>427</sup> As Nelson emphasizes, scholarship that focuses exclusively on the "uni-directional assumption of the metropolis as the center being flattened but someone how transformed by the societies, cultures, politics, and people of the colonies" is misleading, and fails to account for the forms of cultural, economic, and political agency of colonial subjects." Nelson, *Slavery, Geography, and Empire*, 64.

century, even if signs of such contestation are not always registered in the formal logic of his pictures. Recent scholarship offers illuminating glimpses of how American Western visual culture in the nineteenth century was attuned to the politics of labor, including Robin Kelsey's claim that Timothy O'Sullivan created correspondences between the materiality of his silver gelatin prints and the labor of hard rock silver mining; John Ott's study of Gilded Age political caricature in San Francisco as imagery that contested the "panoramic prospect" view associated with a managerial elite; and Amy Defalco Lippert's analysis of the emergence of the miner archetype in Gold Rush portrait photography, an archetype that accommodated acts of self-definition from the perspective of labor.<sup>428</sup> Bierstadt's landscapes were one component of a broader visual culture that was grappling with the globe-spanning reach of financial capitalism. While Bierstadt's landscapes exhibit a form of pictorial intelligence whose complexity is worthy of a dedicated study, the blindered nature of the worldview that it promotes might be more clearly evident when his paintings are put into conversation with other period forms of visual culture.

In a final tally, perhaps the most telling aspects of Bierstadt's pictures are not stylistic, but rather those that arise from the margins of a conventional aesthetic

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<sup>428</sup> Robin Kelsey, "Notes from the Field: Materiality," *The Art Bulletin* 95, no. 1 (March 2013): 21-23; John Ott, *Manufacturing the Modern Patron in Victorian California: Cultural Philanthropy, Industrial Capital, and Social Authority* (London, UK: Ashgate, 2014); and Amy K. Defalco Lippert, *Consuming Identities: Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018).

encounter. At various points during his career, Bierstadt's exhibition landscapes and the financialized worldview that they represented came into contact with the cultural politics of American Indian labor. This contact took place backstage at the 1864 Metropolitan Sanitary Fair, when the hired American Indian performers refused to accommodate Bierstadt's exploitative labor demands; it surfaced again in 1889 when the Lakota Sioux performer Ínʔyaŋ Mathó pulled the Paris exhibition of *The Last of the Buffalo* into the orbit of his own Lakota politics of self-definition.<sup>429</sup>

The paintings of the contemporary Cree artist Kent Monkman show that such strategies of critique persist in the present day. Starting in 2003, Monkman embarked on a series of paintings in which he recreated well-known Bierstadt landscapes, including *A Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, and *Mount Corcoran*, which Monkman reproduced as *The Bears of Confederation* (fig. 5.1) and *History is Painted by the Victors* (fig. 5.2), respectively.<sup>430</sup> This series, Monkman explains, transforms Bierstadt's landscapes into spaces for self-definition by groups typically marginalized by the cultural forces of Anglo-American expansion. "When you look at [Bierstadt's]

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<sup>429</sup> Emily C. Burns, *Transnational Frontiers: The American West in France* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), 59-64.

<sup>430</sup> Monkman's Bierstadt paintings are part of a broader project in which he recreates the work of canonical American Western artists, such as George Catlin and Edward Curtis, so as to undermine the scopic regimes that they participate in. For more on Monkman's critique of historical imagery, see David McIntosh, "Chief Eagle Testickle, Postindian Diva Warrior, in the Shadowy Hall of Mirrors," in *Kent Monkman: The Triumph of Mischief* (Hamilton, ON: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2008), 31-43.

paintings as an aboriginal person,” Monkman writes, “you realize how subjective they are. So when I make these paintings, I’m not necessarily repainting history, but I’m nudging people toward seeing that there are these big missing narratives.”<sup>431</sup>

Monkman achieves this aim by repopulating Bierstadt’s vacant foregrounds with indigenous peoples and white men, a move that has the effect of turning the mountain landscape into a secondary backdrop.<sup>432</sup> Monkman describes the function of these figural groupings as one of substitution. “A lot of the painters at the time were projecting Christian ideologies into the North American landscape. So with my paintings, I’m looking at the same land—the mountains, trees, sky, and inserting elements of our own sexuality as well.”<sup>433</sup> The central protagonist in these insertions

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<sup>431</sup> David Furnish, “Kent Monkman: The Canadian Artist who is Exploding the Mythology of the West—One Brushstroke at a Time,” *Interview Magazine* (March 2006), 136. Kate Morris proposes that Monkman’s paintings “call out not only Bierstadt’s artifice but also his failure of vision, his inability to see the landscapes before him.” Morris, *Shifting Grounds: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 134.

<sup>432</sup> In Monkman’s work, the narrative elements of the foreground are meant in part to evoke a broader history of indigenous performance, particularly in the context of those pieces which refer to George Catlin’s Indian Gallery of the early nineteenth century. Julie Nagam, Kerry Swanson, Cheryl L’Hirondelle, Kent Monkman, “Decolonial Interventions in Performance and New Media Art: In Conversation with Cheryl L’Hirondelle and Kent Monkman,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 159 (Summer 2015): 30-37. If Bierstadt distanced his artistic practice from cultural discourses of performance following his experiences with his Indian Department at the Metropolitan Sanitary Fair, Monkman reforges this connection.

<sup>433</sup> Furnish, “Kent Monkman,” 136-137. Monkman’s pictures also challenge the historical frameworks through which queer desire has often been viewed. *Bears of Confederation*, for instance, is a response to how early American laws classifying sodomy lumped together bestiality and same-sex sexuality. Anthony Rotundo,

is often Monkman's drag alter-ego, Chief Eagle Testickle, a time-travelling "two-spirit," whose imagery is based on Cher's 1960 half-breed persona, and who infuses Bierstadt's imagery with a non-binary form of indigenous sexuality so as to "rectify the effects of colonization on Native definitions of gender and sexual variability."<sup>434</sup> In *History is Painted by the Victors*, Chief Eagle Testickle appears in her customary guise—nude, save for thigh-high red boots (fig. 5.3).<sup>435</sup> Standing at an easel, she faces a group of nude white soldiers who bathe, lounge, and box in the sun, their Army uniforms scattered in the grass and sand.<sup>436</sup> Notably, the soldiers' poses are based on the late-nineteenth-century paintings of the Philadelphia artist Thomas Eakins, particularly *Swimming* (fig. 5.3). Playing off of Eakins' nude imagery—which has been subjected to extensive debate in regards to the artist's sexuality and his relationship to period conceptions of gender—Monkman casts these bodies as agents

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*American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 83-84.

<sup>434</sup> Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, Sabine Lang, "Introduction," in *Two-Spirit People: Native American Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, eds. Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, Sabine Lang. (Chicago: University of Illinois, 1997): 2

<sup>435</sup> Monkman explains that Chief Eagle Testickle's imagery exemplifies his own desire for a "reclaiming of stereotypes that have been harmful . . . you reclaim them and then you present them from a position of power and that's really what I wanted to do." David Liss, "Kent Monkman: Miss Chief Returns," *Canadian Art* (Fall 2005): 25.

<sup>436</sup> The easel shows the product of her efforts, a painting done in the style of a Plains ledger drawing, depicting the Battle of Little Big Horn, the site of the Lakota Sioux's famed 1876 victory over General George Armstrong Custer.

and objects of queer desire.<sup>437</sup> Furthermore, by presenting Eakins' figures as if they were posing for Chief Eagle Testickle, he reverses the customary relationship between white artist and indigenous model in the imagery of Anglo-American imperialism.

Functioning as a critique of the modes of representation typically levied at indigenous bodies in the nineteenth-century, Monkman's imagery also parodies the late nineteenth-century masculinist fantasies of the Old West, in which white male businessmen, concerned about the so-called feminizing impulses of urbanization, went west as tourists seeing manly revitalization through contact with a rugged frontier.<sup>438</sup> But the stakes of Monkman's critique are not merely historical. By anachronistically intermixing multiple forms of western imagery in his picture—Bierstadt, Cher's half-breed, and Custer and Little Big Horn—Monkman offers viewers an alternate mode of consuming the popular imagery of the West, one that breaks from the nostalgic, heterosexual vision of the western frontier that predominates in white conservatism.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> For an introduction to these debates, see Martin A. Berger, *Man Made: Thomas Eakins and the Construction of Gilded Age Manhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>438</sup> Sarah Burns offers a useful discussion of period beliefs in the masculating effects of wilderness in Burns, "Revitalizing the 'Painted-Out' North: Winslow Homer, Manly Health, and New England Regionalism in Turn-of-the-Century America," *American Art* 9. No. 2 (Summer 1995): 20-37. See also, Monica Rico, *Nature's Noblemen: Transatlantic Masculinities and the Nineteenth-Century American West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>439</sup> For a recent reappraisal of the racism underlying the notion of the western frontier, see Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2019).

The title of the picture, *History is Painted by the Victors*, emphasizes the ongoing nature of this struggle.

Bierstadt's paintings may have visualized a West whose meaning hinged on the marketization of its land, but his pictures have also afforded and continue to afford opportunities to push back against this worldview. The historical capacity of Bierstadt's pictures to incite contestation from the perspective of historically dispossessed groups may be the key to their relevance to the future.

## **FIGURES**

**IMAGES REMOVED DUE TO COPYRIGHT**



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Albert Bierstadt Letter Collection, 1880-1893

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