

MEMBER LIBRARY

ALBERT BIERSTADT (1830 – 1902) Painter of the American West



Theodore J. Holsten
EMERITUS MEMBER
Boone and Crockett Club

Albert Bierstadt is best known for the paintings he created depicting the Rockies, the geysers and falls of the Yellowstone, the Yosemite Valley, Indian encampments and buffalo; all of which helped introduce

Americans to the spectacular scenery of the American West. His landscape paintings were sometimes exaggerated, usually painted to an overly large size, but they were enormously popular in the 1860s and into the 1870s.

That Bierstadt was able to achieve such a high level of success was greatly helped by his outgoing people skills. He was a born promoter, always seeking out friends in high places. He cultivated royalty in Europe and people of wealth and influence in the United States. This, of course, helped sell his paintings that fetched as much as \$25,000 each, a tidy sum in the mid-19th century. Among his friends was Theodore Roosevelt, and when the Boone and Crockett Club was founded in 1887, Bierstadt was invited to become a charter member.

A good example of Bierstadt's promotional skills involved Grand Duke Alexis of

Russia. In 1871 Bierstadt learned that Alexis was planning a visit to America and that he wanted to participate in a buffalo hunt. What better person could make the arrangements for such a hunt than one of the most conspicuous western specialists in the country, Bierstadt himself! Arrangements with General William Tecumseh Sherman and with the secretary of war put the wheels in motion. Russian flags and decorations were prepared for the pier in New York harbor to which the grand duke's ship would arrive. Bierstadt arranged for a ball at the Academy of Music to which the flower of New York society was invited. As to the hunt itself, General Philip Sheridan secured Buffalo Bill Cody's services to see that Alexis got his buffalo and a thousand Indians were engaged to put on a show for Alexis. Bierstadt was later honored with the Order of Saint Stanislaus for his services to the grand duke.

Albert Bierstadt was born in Germany in Solingen, a few miles inland from Dusseldorf. When he was 2 years old his family moved to New Bedford, presumably because his father, a skilled cooper, could find immediate work making barrels for the burgeoning whaling fleet, a skill in high demand. Early in life he showed such interest in painting that by his 20th birthday he was giving students art lessons. Realizing he

needed more sophisticated lessons himself, he arranged to go back to Dusseldorf which had become a major art center. He would remain in Europe for four years perfecting his painting technique. When he returned to the United States, his career moved rapidly forward. In 1859 he joined Frederick Lander's survey party to the Black Hills and the Continental Divide, the first of a lifetime of journeys throughout the West, sketching and painting its glories.

By the 1880s, the public reaction to Bierstadt's art took a sharp decline. A new school, the Impressionists, was now taking over the mainstream of fashion. The decline in his popularity continued until his death in New York in 1902. When he died, he was broke and virtually unknown. It was not until recent years that his spectacular landscapes became appreciated again and the high value of his paintings restored. In 1973, reflecting this renewed popularity, Gordon Hendricks wrote the first definitive biography of Albert Bierstadt that provided much of the information for this article. ■

BELOW: *Last of the Buffalo*, 1888. **OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE:** *Mount Brewer from Kings River Canyon, California*, 1872. ■ *Camping in the Yosemite*, 1864. ■ *Estes Park Colorado, Whyte's Lake*, 1877. ■ *The Rocky Mountains, Long Peak*, 1877. ■ A photo of Albert Bierstadt at about forty-two. ■ The artist's studio, 1902.





Alfred Bierstadt

