

ART AND THE OREGON TRAIL

Background: Landscape artists of the mid 1800s helped to draw pioneers westward with their grand views of the west, particularly with paintings of the Rocky Mountains. One such artist was **Albert Bierstadt**, a German American who went west on a surveying expedition. He was awed by the grandeur of the Rockies and made sketches in a journal of what he saw and felt as he traveled in present day Colorado and Wyoming. When he returned to his studio back east he painted mountain scenes from his memory and sketchbooks. His paintings are grand panoramas of the west with beautiful snowy peaks surrounding lush river valleys and Indian encampments. In the days before photography this was the way the west was visually presented to the public and it looked gorgeous!

Bierstadt was offered \$35,000 for his paintings, a kingly sum in those days! Less famous artists found their work being used in magazines to encourage people to head west.

Lesson Ideas

Find a print(s) of Bierstadt's *The Rocky Mountains*, 1863, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. If you are in the Highline School District, it is available from film booking. (206-433-2394)

Have the students gather around so they can see closely. You may provide a few magnifying glasses since this picture is rich in detail.

Discuss **landscape painting** with the children. Help them to identify the **background, middleground and foreground**. Allow the children to make observations of what they see in these parts of Bierstadt's work. This painting is large in scale; the artist is covering a lot of territory here! Be sure they notice the great details in the Indian encampment in the foreground, and the artist's own easel in left center. Note the subtle use of **color**. Compare and contrast the painting to a photograph. Would this be a place they would like to head west to see or live in? Why would it attract pioneers?

Give the children landscape photos to draw. Emphasize filling the entire paper and drawing in the background, mid ground, and foreground. See if they can blend and match colors with their photo. Does their final picture look like the photo? Why or why not?

Another idea would be to have the students imagine they are in the picture, *The Rocky Mountains*. Can they write a story of where they might go and what they would do if they suddenly entered the picture?

Materials

- Large print or prints of Bierstadt's *The Rocky Mountains*
- Magnifying glasses
- Photos of landscapes, *Sunset Magazine* and calendar pictures work well.
- Colored pencils
- Paper

Websites

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/view1.asp?dep=2&full=1&item=07%2E123>

Direct link to the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, *The Rocky Mountains*

http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/teaching_materials/curricula/curriculum.cfm?curriculum_id=328&mode=full

The Kennedy Center ARTSEGE link to painting a landscape

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

A brief biography and a collection of nearly 400 paintings by Bierstadt

http://www.glacierparkphotos.com/cgi-bin/Web_store/web_store.cgi?page=mountains.html

Landscape photographs of Glacier National Park