

Albert Bierstadt: A "Fond and Faithful Student of Nature"
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The name Albert Bierstadt typically calls to mind vast, sweeping panoramas of the Rocky Mountains, their majestic peaks silhouetted against dramatic, stormy skies. In both his own day as well as in ours Bierstadt was known primarily for his grand and romanticized depictions of the American West. Having personally observed the unspoiled splendor of the western frontier, first in the spring of 1859 and then numerous times thereafter, Bierstadt produced throughout his lengthy and prolific career innumerable images of western scenery. His "Great Pictures"¹ of the Rocky Mountains, Sierra Nevada, and Yosemite Valley, visually overwhelming in both their huge scale and meticulous attention to detail, propelled the artist to almost instant fame. Although not the first to depict the American West, it was Bierstadt whose name became synonymous with such scenery.

This tendency to focus on Bierstadt as *the* painter of the American West overshadows other aspects of his identity as an artist and ignores a significant portion of his artistic output. Throughout his career Bierstadt traveled extensively, continually in search of new vistas to capture with his brush. Thus the artist's *oeuvre* consists of images of a wide range of geographical locations, from Europe to the Caribbean.² Among the least explored subjects in Bierstadt's art are his images of the Hudson River. From 1866 until 1882 Bierstadt maintained a prominent artistic presence on the Hudson while living and working in his grand and imposing mansion, Malkasten. Although during this time he did not create many large-scale paintings of the Hudson, he did paint numerous oil sketches of the river directly from nature. A discussion of these sketches as well as of Malkasten itself reveals a different aspect of Bierstadt's artistic identity than that which is typically focused on and places him within a tradition of artists such as Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand who, believing in the importance of directly studying and learning from nature, engaged in plein air oil sketching along the banks of the Hudson River.

As the art historian Eleanor Lewis Jones Harvey has noted, by the middle of the nineteenth

century in America the practice of outdoor oil sketching had become an integral part of landscape painting.³ The direct study of nature was seen as absolutely fundamental for the landscape artist who wished to hone and improve his skill. The artist Thomas Cole is often credited with having first inspired American landscape artists to sketch *en plein air*. Cole's now mythic trip to the Catskills in 1825 and the resulting three paintings brought to public attention the notion of working directly from nature. It was Cole's associate Asher B. Durand, however, who became the foremost champion of plein air oil sketching during the nineteenth century. In 1855 he published a series of nine "Letters on Landscape Painting" in the influential art journal the *Crayon* in which he advocated painting directly from nature. For both Cole and Durand, sketching *en plein air* was the landscape painter's equivalent to the formal training of the academies. As Harvey states, "By studying nature's features, the landscape painter acquired the knowledge and skill necessary to paint landscapes that were both accurate and inspired."⁴ Thus by mid-century plein air sketching had become widely accepted and was generally expected of landscape painters.

Bierstadt, like most other landscape artists of his generation, was significantly influenced by the contemporary discussions of plein air oil sketching. Even during the beginning of his career he greatly valued working directly from nature. In 1853 he traveled to Düsseldorf, Germany, then the home of an internationally renowned school of landscape painting. Rather than enrolling at the academy, however, Bierstadt chose instead to learn his craft by both observing other artists as well as by studying from nature. As Worthington Whittredge, another American artist in Düsseldorf at the time, recalled, during his first year in Europe Bierstadt undertook a major sketching expedition, intending to teach himself to paint by working and learning directly from nature. After he returned to the United States, producing plein air sketches became an integral part of Bierstadt's working practice. His studies from nature provided the raw data for his final compositions, which were constructed from individual motifs culled from various sketches. To further aid his study of nature and to ensure its accurate transcription onto canvas, Bierstadt sometimes used photography as well as sketching, a practice most likely influenced

by his photographer brothers, Edward and Charles.⁵ The importance of the direct observation of nature to Bierstadt's work was acknowledged in his own time. As Henry Tuckerman discussed in his 1867 *Book of the Artists*, Bierstadt was "...a fond and faithful student of nature..." whose "...every interval of leisure has been and is still devoted to the study and transcript of natural phenomena."⁶

It is within the context of the mid-nineteenth century emphasis on sketching *en plein air* that Bierstadt's decision in 1865 to build his home on the Hudson River can in part be understood. As the scholar Linda Ferber has noted, "...the banks of the Hudson River were long-hallowed sketching grounds for the American landscape school."⁷ Despite increasing industrialization, the river still provided artists with areas of relatively unspoiled nature from which they could work and draw inspiration. Thus, painters ranging from Cole to Durand to Frederic Church sketched along the river and in the surrounding woods. Bierstadt, choosing to both live and work on the Hudson, can be aligned with the tradition established by these artists.

Completed by the fall of 1866, Bierstadt's home Malkasten was, according to contemporary descriptions, essentially an "artist's home."⁸ Named after an artists' club in Düsseldorf, Malkasten not only contained a studio large enough to accommodate work on Bierstadt's Great Pictures easily, but the entire house, including the site and surrounding grounds, was designed to facilitate the artist's study of nature. Malkasten was built near the village of Irvington-on-Hudson, a location that was ideally suited for the needs of a landscape painter. Irvington, by this time a relatively developed suburban area, was located along the railway line that led directly to New York City, then the heart of the American art world. Yet within a few miles of the village was the "untamed wilderness" that painters such as Bierstadt sought for artistic inspiration.

The specific site that Bierstadt selected for his house was high up on a hill and commanded a panoramic view of the Hudson River and Valley. This breathtaking view was much commented upon in contemporary descriptions of the house. According to Martha Lamb in her 1879 book *The Homes of America*, Malkasten commanded "...one of the best views of the Hudson River."⁹ The house itself was

designed with several balconies, bays and porches as well as a tower, all intended to provide Bierstadt with continual access to artistically inspiring views of the river. One of Bierstadt's largest works depicting the Hudson, *View of the Hudson Looking Across the Tappan Zee Towards Hook Mountain*, was in fact, according to Lamb, painted by Bierstadt while looking out at the river from one of the northwest studio windows.¹⁰

The most grand and extravagant room in Malkasten was Bierstadt's studio. Seventy feet long, thirty feet wide and thirty feet high, the studio took up nearly one third of the house. It was large enough to allow Bierstadt to work on several pictures at once, as well as to house a library. In terms of accommodating the study of nature, the most interesting element of the studio was a set of three large sliding doors that opened onto the north, south and east lawns. As Barry Gray discussed in an 1871 article for the *Home Journal*, these doors were useful when "the artist paints from life a horse, deer, buffalo, or other animal, or an object which it is desirable to see at a greater distance than even his capacious studio will permit."¹¹ Even the lawns themselves were, according to Bierstadt, "especially arranged with a view to painting animals under the best possible conditions of light and shade and background."¹² Altogether, it is apparent that Malkasten was designed to allow Bierstadt to directly study and draw inspiration from nature from the comfort of his own home and its environs.

The numerous surviving oil sketches of the area around Malkasten and Irvington attest to the fact that Bierstadt did sketch out-of-doors often during the years that he lived on the banks of the Hudson. Most of these works are small plein air studies done in oil on academic board or paper, although a few are more finished works on canvas. The sketches reveal a wide array of different approaches to the scenery surrounding Bierstadt's home. Some, such as a small work on paper possibly titled *Lawn at Malkasten*, focus on an individual motif, here an arrangement of shrubbery just barely beginning to don its autumnal finery (fig. 1). The quick, loose, feathery brush stroke Bierstadt employed in this work to convey the texture of the leaves stands in contrast to the broader, more sweeping application of paint he used in a series of sketches of the Hudson in which he attempted to

capture the transient effects of light and atmosphere. These works, of which *Approaching Thunderstorm on the Hudson* is exemplary, are essentially greatly simplified, monochromatic studies of weather conditions (fig. 2). Bierstadt also painted more finished sketches of the Hudson, such as *Figures in a Hudson River Landscape* in which greater attention has been paid to composition and the arrangement of forms (fig. 3). Overall, these plein air studies are similar only in the fact that they offer a more intimate, less dramatic view of nature than that provided in Bierstadt's Great Pictures of the West.

It is difficult to say with any certainty what purpose these outdoor sketches of the Hudson served. They may possibly have been preparatory studies that Bierstadt intended to utilize in the creation of finished works on canvas; however, there are very few surviving paintings of the Hudson River by Bierstadt's hand. It does not appear that the artist ever chose to exhibit any of these sketches, although there is evidence that a few of his small works on canvas were shown at charity events.¹³ All of these works do, however, undoubtedly display Bierstadt's belief in the importance of directly studying nature. Like the other artists who sketched along the banks of the Hudson, Bierstadt was most assuredly influenced by Cole's and Durand's insistence that the landscape artist hone and improve his skills by working from nature. Even if these sketches were never turned into finished works they provided Bierstadt with important practice. They can also be seen as intimate, personal recordings by an artist of the area in which he lived, worked, and received his inspiration.

This image of Bierstadt as a painter of small, intimate plein air sketches of such familiar imagery as the Hudson River may seem alien to today's conception of the artist, yet during his own time the public knew this side of Bierstadt well. Although the newspapers and art journals abounded with discussions of his Western pictures, including the occasional sarcastic comment concerning the huge size of such works, when Bierstadt chose to build his home on the Hudson many were quick to make the connection between this decision and the by then well-established tradition of sketching along the banks of the river. Already by 1867 Henry Tuckerman would affirm this link by stating "It was

because of his conviction that the patient and faithful study of nature is the only adequate school of landscape art that Bierstadt, like Cole and Church, fixed his abode on the banks of the Hudson."¹⁴

During the sixteen years that Bierstadt owned Malkasten there arose a somewhat romanticized notion of him as an artist who was both inspired by and worked directly from nature.¹⁵ The *Home Journal* did much to promote this image of the artist, running stories on Bierstadt's search for the ideal site on which to build his home. Bierstadt supposedly stumbled across the site one day by following a hawk while he was out sketching--hence the original name of his residence, Hawksrest. One article went on to poetically emphasize the role of nature as muse and source of inspiration for the landscape painter.

According to the article:

"Here," he [Bierstadt] mused, as he looked with a painter's eye upon the scene before him, "will I build my home; here, in the coming years will I dream dreams and see visions--such dreams as poets dream and such visions as artists love to look upon....In the far off mountains I will find suggestions of grandeur and in the river flowing at my feet ideas of grace and loveliness..."¹⁶

This image of Bierstadt became so well known that when in 1876 Martha Lamb first published her discussion of the *Homes of America* in the *Art Journal* her description of Malkasten was illustrated by an engraving of the house that included the artist seated in front of an easel on the lawn, hard at work (fig. 4).

Overall, what becomes readily apparent is that Bierstadt was a highly nuanced artist, capable of working in a variety of different modes. In his own day he was known both for his sublime depictions of the untamed American West as well as for his intimate and highly personal portrayals of the area that he called home. Bierstadt as "artist-explorer" and Bierstadt as "fond and faithful student of nature"¹⁷ both deserve equal due. Although recent attempts have been made to open up examinations of Bierstadt's work to include more than just his Great Pictures, the work that he did while living upon the banks of the Hudson River--the work which perhaps places him most firmly within the tradition of the "Hudson River School" of painters--remains open for further exploration.

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- 1 The term "Great Picture" refers to a large painting that was intended to be exhibited publicly. Such paintings, which had become quite popular in America by the mid-eighteenth century, tended to depict highly detailed landscapes with dramatic effects of light.
 - 2 During the 1970s and 80s there were several scholarly attempts to expand the discussion of Bierstadt's art to include works other than his major Western scenes. See for example William C. Lipke and Philip N. Grime, "Albert Bierstadt in New Hampshire," *The Currier Gallery of Art Bulletin* 2 (1973): 20-37 and Gerald L. Carr, *Albert Bierstadt: An Exhibition of Forty Paintings* (New York, NY: Alexander Gallery, 1983), exh. cat.
 - 3 Eleanor Lewis Jones Harvey, "'That Earlier, Wilder Image': Oil Sketches by American Landscape Painters, 1830-1880" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1998), 1.
 - 4 Harvey, 51.
 - 5 It is known that Bierstadt definitely used photography as a sketching aid while on his first trip West in 1859 and it is likely that he continued to use it throughout his career. Bierstadt also sometimes collaborated on projects with his brothers Edward and Charles, professional photographers who produced numerous images of the East coast, including the White Mountains in New Hampshire and various areas along the Hudson River. See Elizabeth Lindquist-Cock, "The Influence of Photography on American Landscape Painting, 1839-1880" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1988).
 - 6 Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1867. Reprint, New York: James F. Carr, 1966), 388, 396.
 - 7 N.K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art and Enterprise* (New York, NY: The Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1990), exh. cat., 35.
 - 8 *NY Times*, 11 Nov. 1882.
 - 9 Martha Lamb, *The Homes of America* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1879), 150.
 - 10 Lamb refers to the painting as *The Home of Irving*. Lamb, 150.
 - 11 Barry Gray, "Hawksrest, The Residence of Albert Bierstadt," *Home Journal*, 1871. Bierstadt Scrapbook, Brooklyn Museum of Art Libraries Collection, Edwards Collection.
 - 12 *The New York Sun*, 11 Nov. 1882.
 - 13 Gordon Hendricks, in his *Albert Bierstadt: Painter of the American West* (New York, NY: Harrison House/Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988) mentions on page 172 a small painting of the Hudson that Bierstadt exhibited at the Soldiers and Sailors benefit exhibition held in New York in late 1870. In an undated pamphlet for the Exhibition for the Benefit of the Milwaukee Art School included in the Bierstadt Scrapbook in the Edwards Collection at the Brooklyn Museum of Art there is an entry for a small Bierstadt painting titled *Sunset on the Hudson River*.
 - 14 Tuckerman, 396.
 - 15 The house was destroyed by fire on November 11th, 1882.
 - 16 From an undated clipping from the *Home Journal*, cited in Gordon Hendricks, *A. Bierstadt* (Fort Worth, TX: Amon Carter Museum, 1972), 22.
 - 17 Tuckerman, 388.