albert bierstadt, fitz hugh ludlow and the american western landscape

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> Sitting in their divine workshop, by a little after sunrise our artists began labor in that only method which can ever make a true painter or a living landscape—color studies on the spot; and though I can not here speak of their results, I will assert that during their seven weeks' camp in the Valley they learned more and gained greater material for future triumphs than they had gotten in all their lives before at the feet of the greatest masters.
>
> —Fitz Hugh Ludlow
> *The Heart of the Continent*

If there was one quality common to most Americans throughout the span of the nineteenth century, it was the direction of their gaze westward past the Mississippi River towards the Rocky Mountains and the Far West. Easterners, hungry for knowledge of a part of the country they would most likely never see, greedily devoured any kind of information about the West. Of that information, there was no short supply. Writers, painters, artists, poets and pretenders throughout the century sought Western themes and settings for their works. One such artist who brought a visual image of the Far West to the Eastern coast was the landscapist, Albert Bierstadt. Immensely popular in his day, Bierstadt has been relegated to a kind of critical oblivion in the twentieth century.

By employing some of the critical techniques used to compare painting and literature, it may be possible to understand more fully the significance of Bierstadt's work in the context of his time, and in the context of the history of American landscape painting as a whole.[1] Why was Bierstadt's vision of the West so popular, and how does he compare to

other landscapists of his century? In 1863, Bierstadt travelled with a journalist-friend, Fitz Hugh Ludlow, on one of his longer trips to the Far West. I want to examine the two together to try to reach more complete answers to the questions just posed.

Bierstadt and Ludlow became friends as young men during the years just prior to the Civil War. Yet one would scarcely have predicted such a friendship given the facts of their disparate backgrounds. Bierstadt was born in 1830 near Düsseldorf, Germany, and his parents moved to America when he was less than two years old. Growing up in New Bedford, Massachusetts, he received an unexceptional education. Bierstadt did not start painting in oils until 1851, when he was twenty-one years of age. Traveling back to Düsseldorf in the 1850's, Bierstadt received formal training in the lyrical, romantic genre style of Lessing and Achenbach. After his return to the United States, he traveled to upper New England to paint the same mountains which had attracted Durand, Kensett, and other landscapists of his time.

However, Bierstadt was intrigued by reports of magnificent mountain ranges in the West. In 1857 he joined the Landers Company, an expedition of geologists and surveyors exploring the Nebraska Territory and other Western areas under the charge of a railroad company. Six years later, he joined, with Fitz Hugh Ludlow, another party travelling west, this time to California. By the early 1860's, Bierstadt had sent some of his first Western landscapes to the National Academy in New York, but they aroused little public interest or critical acclaim. In 1864, though, he exhibited his giant (six feet by ten feet) canvas entitled, "Rocky Mountains—Landers Peak," and overnight became an enormous popular success. For the next twenty years, he continued to produce canvases of the West.[2]

Fitz Hugh Ludlow was born in New York in 1836, the son of an abolitionist minister. Ludlow attended Union College in Schenectady, where he performed fairly well. After college, he began a reasonably successful career as a journalist. At some point after his graduation from college, Ludlow began eating hashish or opium, and perhaps both. In 1857 he published a narrative of his experiences with drugs, *The Hashish Eater,* modeled after DeQuincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater.* In the late 1850's Ludlow met Bierstadt in New York, they became good friends, and in 1863 travelled west together. Ludlow published his impressions of the trip in a series of articles for *The Atlantic Monthly,* and, in 1870, expanded these articles into *The Heart of the Continent.* Ludlow died, possibly of causes related to his drug habits, that same year.[3]

Consequently, *The Heart of the Continent* and Bierstadt's paintings of the West are the works of two close friends, traveling together to the same places to record their impressions in two different media. How similar these men were in interest and sensibility is suggested by the fact that they both married the same woman. Rosalie Osborne's marriage to

Ludlow ended unhappily, most likely because of his continued experimentation with drugs. In 1866, though, she married Bierstadt.[4]

As a journalist, Ludlow's reaction to the West was certainly more descriptive than philosophical, yet his underlying convictions concerning the nature of the West are apparent. His most basic reaction to the Rockies and the Far West was that the landscape was "unworldly." (11)[5] He writes of the West as "like a new planet," (409) and also relates his inability to compare the Western landscape to anything in the East: "It [this view of the Rocky Mountains] cannot be described by any Eastern analogy: no other far mountain view that I ever saw is at all like it." (130)

Upon entering the mountains, Ludlow repeats this theme: "In the East, there is nothing to illustrate the Rocky Mountains by. With the Rocky Mountains, the Alleghanies and the Taconic have no common terms." (142) If the Western Landscape is other-worldly, and physically unrelated to the Eastern landscape, it is also infused with a special spiritual power much like that which many other artists felt resided in the Eastern landscape. For Ludlow, the West is "like the Garden of Eden." (131) In traveling to the Yosemite Valley in California, he related that "if reports were true, we were going to the original site of the Garden of Eden." (412) When he arrives at Yosemite, Ludlow confirms the reports:

> That name [Inspiration Point] appeared pedantic, but we found it only the spontaneous expression of our feelings on that spot. We did not seem so much to be seeing from that crag of vision a new scene on the old familiar globe, as a new heaven and a new earth into which creative spirit had just been breathed. I hesitate now, as I did then, at the attempt to give my vision utterance. Never were words so beggared for an abridged translation of any Scripture of Nature. (426)

In general, then, Ludlow associates nature with the power of creation. It is a power which is beneficent, as the walls of the canyon across the valley from where he stands "smile, not frown." (427) In this respect Ludlow is working within the general Romantic tradition of Bryant and Thomas Cole. The American landscape is the manifestation of a powerful, creative and benevolent Nature.

For our purpose, the most significant observation Ludlow makes during the course of his journey pertains to the moment when one first sees a magnificent view. Ludlow describes his first sight of the Rockies and of Yosemite as imbued with a special significance. Of his first close-up view of the Rockies, Ludlow relates, "As the entire fact in all its meaning possesses you completely, you feel a sensation which is as new to your life as it is impossible of repetition. I confess (I should be ashamed not to confess) that my first view of the Rocky Mountains had no way of

expressing itself save in tears. To see what they looked, and know what they were, was like a sudden revelation of truth. . . ." (131)

Later, when describing the view from Inspiration Point in Yosemite, Ludlow reiterates this emphasis on the first striking glance at a panorama. "I saw a wall like our own [referring to the canyon face], but as yet we could not know that for certain, for of our own we saw nothing. Our eyes seemed spell-bound to the tremendous precipice which stood smiling, not frowning at us. . . . In the first astonishment of the view, we took the whole battlement at a sweep, and seemed to see an unbroken skyline; but as ecstasy gave way to examination, we discovered how greatly some proportions of the precipice surpassed our immediate *vis-a-vis* in height." (426-7)

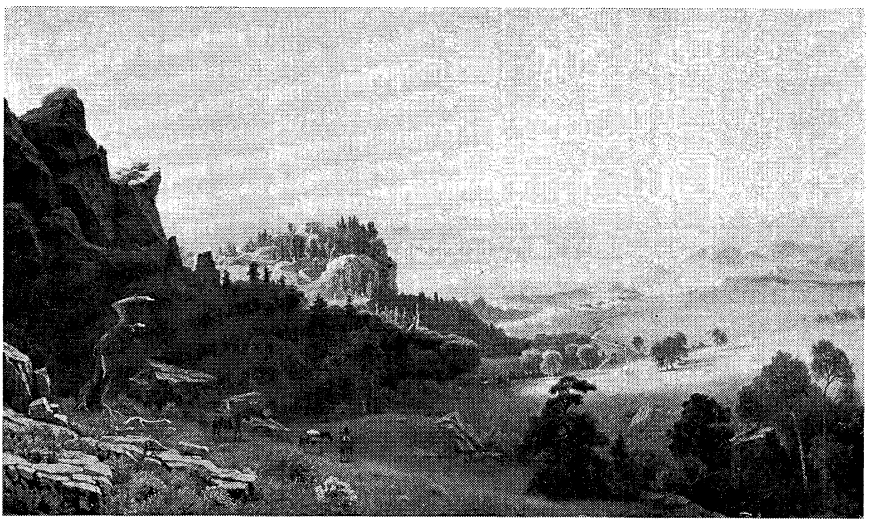
The importance of the first view in any panoramic scene is once again emphasized as Ludlow states in another passage: "How far off it [the other canyon wall] might be we could only guess. When Nature's lightning hits a man fair and square it splits his yardstick." (426) It is precisely this emphasis on the first, sublime moments of viewing an awe-inspiring landscape which seems to be at the center of Bierstadt's conception of the panorama. Critics have censured Bierstadt's large panoramic canvases almost from the day they were first exhibited. James Jackson Jarves observed in 1869, "They [Bierstadt's large canvases] do address significantly the majority of Americans, who associate them with the vulgar ideas of 'big things' as business. In reality they are bold and effective speculations on the principles of trade; they are emotionless and soulless. . . ."[6]

James Thomas Flexner in the present day is similarly critical of Bierstadt, and states that his large panoramas are particularly unappealing: "Bierstadt's [large paintings] are best at a distance and at first glance."[7] In a roundabout way, Flexner has realized these panoramas' true distinctiveness, an effect which was possibly a conscious effort on Bierstadt's part. In line with Ludlow's concern for the preciousness of the first moment of sight, these panoramas can best be approached as lending themselves to the magnificence of the first moment. They seem to convey that sense of awesomeness which Ludlow and his traveling companions, including Bierstadt, felt upon first seeing the Rockies and Inspiration Point. In the first place, these panoramas are huge, many measuring approximately six feet in height and ten feet in length.

In addition, in a panorama like "Rocky Mountain—Landers Peak" (1863), there is no central point of focus which directs the viewer's sight at first glance.[8] The entire canvas is given approximately equal focal value. Finally, the composition of the painting pushes the borders outward. The two lower mountain ranges move diagonally upward and outward from the center, and this movement is repeated by a cluster of trees on the left and the shadow line on the right. There is some sense, then, of almost endless space on either side of the canvas. All these

elements achieve the kind of awe-struck first moment on the part of the viewer.

This effect is repeated in many other of Bierstadt's large canvases. In "View from the Wind River Mountains" (1860), for example, the



Albert Bierstadt, **View from the Wind River Mountains, Wyoming** (1860). Oil on canvas, 30 1/4 by 48 1/4 inches. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

same lack of initial focus occurs. The hills move upward and outward from the center of the painting, and the horizon is stretched far into the background to provide the added element of vast depth. In "Mount Whitney" (1875), similar aspects of construction are manipulated to achieve a sense of awesome space. The old Claudian formula is broken up as mountain ridges on both sides of the painting push upward and outward from just left of center on the canvas.[9] The peak of the mountain extends upward, giving the illusion of further space vertically as well as horizontally. In all of these canvases, the first impression is one of size, power and grandeur.

In addition to this general, conceptual similarity between Ludlow's prose descriptions and Bierstadt's paintings, there are some formal similarities of visual sense evidenced by the respective works. On many occasions Ludlow comments on the exceptional brilliance of certain colors in the Western landscape. The mountains themselves are usually described as a rather dull shade of brown or grey, but the flatness of this color is counterpointed by brilliant foliage: "Here and there a broad grizzly 'sign' intersected our trail. The tall, purple deer-weed, a magnificent scarlet flower of name unknown to me, and another blossom like the laburnum, endlessly varied in its shades of roseate, blue or the compromised tints, made the hillsides gorgeous beyond human gardening." (425) Descending into the valley beneath Inspiration Point, Ludlow

relates, "There lies a sweep of emerald grass turned to chrysoprase by the slant-beamed sun—chrysoprase beautiful enough to have been the tenth foundation stone of John's apocalyptic heaven." (431)

Bierstadt manifests this same tendency towards brilliant colors. In this respect he is much more similar to Thomas Cole than to Asher B. Durand, George Inness, and other, more subdued landscapists of the time. In "View from the Wind River Mountains" the slopes of the mountain in the foreground are covered with brilliant red and orange bushes, and the grass is a rich green. The trees shade from a deep yellow-green to a brighter green. "Mount Whitney" and "Rocky Mountains—Landers Peak" are similarly counterpointed with brilliant flowers and foliage. These sharp, distinctive colors lend themselves to the image of freshness, youth and the paradisal quality of the landscape as a whole. They are very reminiscent of Ludlow's view of the West as "a new heaven and a new earth into which the creative spirit had just been breathed." (426) Moreover, Bierstadt's rocks and boulders are jagged and angular, as if freshly cut and unworn by the ravages of time. The rocks of the Eastern landscapists, in contrast, are smooth and time-worn, indicative of the relative old age of the Eastern mountain ranges.

Yet beyond these conceptual and perceptual similarities, Ludlow's descriptions and Bierstadt's panoramas are vastly and essentially different. These differences lead directly towards an understanding of Bierstadt's limitations, and more clearly designate his place among the ranks of other American landscapists of the nineteenth century. The basic difference between these two friends rests within the general framework of the nineteenth-century conceptual dilemma concerning the nature of the real and the ideal, and the importance of both.

After remarking on the first, grand sensation of landscape, Ludlow then relates in detail the various objects which compose the view. After being hit by "Nature's lightning," to use Ludlow's own phrase, he recovers his perceptual and analytical facilities and relates that, "Mathematicians have ascertained the width of the canyon between a mile and a half and five miles. Where we stood the width was about two." (426) He then surveys and describes in precise detail the entire canyon. This description continues for the bulk of the chapter concerning the Yosemite. In describing these scenes in detail, Ludlow is obviously manifesting a particular concern for the real. After mentioning the effects and importance of that first glance at a panorama, he then surveys the elements which compose that scene, and his emotional response to the scene is given more depth and made more credible.

Bierstadt, on the other hand, like Frederick Church and Cole, works within the tradition of landscape as history. His large canvases indulge in the rhetoric of grandeur. Bierstadt wished to astound and awe, and in that first, timeless moment he is successful. Yet after that first moment, his panoramas lose much of their attractiveness. Composed in the studio

from multiple sketches of various locations, these panoramas combine elements from different scenes: mountains from one location are placed next to waterfalls from another, which are placed behind plateaus from yet another in order to achieve the maximum sense of awesome perfection. The total picture is sometimes named after a place which does not even exist.[10] The result is visually striking at the first instant, but on closer examination seems unnaturally balanced and artificial. The painting loses the natural, organic quality which makes Ludlow's response so believable. Thus, unlike his friend Ludlow, Bierstadt is totally idealizing in composition.[11] By this fact Bierstadt once more demonstrates his kinship with Thomas Cole.

Unfortunately, unlike many of the landscapists painting at midcentury, Bierstadt also loses sight of the "thing itself" in materialization as well. Unlike Frederick Church, whose precise detail in his larger paintings begs for closer examination, Bierstadt produced panoramas which dissolve into the confusion of fuzzy and imprecise rendering. Perspective is lost, particularly in such areas as the Indian camp in "Rocky Mountains—Landers Peak." The idea of a peculiarly American landscape is also lost. Ludlow spends a great deal of time listing and describing various native American plants, animals, and geological phenomena which lends credence to his attitude of reverence for the landscape as a whole. Bierstadt, on the other hand, as many critics have observed, creates mountains far too vertical and exaggerated to be American, and creates geological formations not found in the continental United States. In fact, if the Indians and American elk were removed from the foregrounds of many of these large canvases, they could just as well be European Alps. Bierstadt's attention to light and geology does not take into consideration local peculiarities, but rather seems predicted on a concern for the picturesque and striking. For instance, in "Mount Whitney" (1875), the top of the mountain appears bright and clear although the entire area around it is shrouded.

The loss of continuity from foreground to background in most of these panoramas also demonstrates a lack of integrity towards the thing itself. In these panoramas the foreground is richly painted and shadowed, while the background is thin and lightly painted. There is no transitional middle space. Thus these large canvases are executed ideally as well as conceived ideally. The landscape is not peculiarly American. After that first successful awe-inspiring glance, these large canvases become conceptually and materially implausible and disappointing. Bierstadt's panoramas, in contrast to Ludlow's descriptions, seem to manipulate the viewer into experiencing only that first moment. Upon closer viewing, the first glance seems predicated on artificiality, not substance.

Bierstadt's smaller landscapes, done in the field, are much more satisfying. They accurately represent specific localities, not forms and elements gathered from various places. They were painted under the

impact of fresh impressions, not in the Eastern studio months or years afterward. While the panoramas attempt to reproduce that awe-inspiring vision, the smaller paintings were created in its afterglow, and its presence is implicitly felt. Thus these smaller works are much more in the vein of plein-air studies than in the salon motif, as Bierstadt attempts to achieve the closest approximation of the visual sensation. They are not slick like the panoramas, but rather more sketch-like. The brush work is much freer, and the smooth finish of the larger paintings is replaced by tactile pigment. In this respect, Bierstadt closely resembles Durand and his "Studies from Nature" and Cole's later work, "The Falls of Munda."

For example, the peculiar quality of the light in his small painting, "Valley of the Yosemite" (1863), is particularly striking. The source of

Albert Bierstadt, **Valley of the Yosemite** (1864). Oil on chipboard, 11¾ by 19¼ inches. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

the light is hidden behind a huge middle-ground rock precipice on the right of the picture, and streams across the lake in the foreground, hitting the rock facing on the left. The yellow-orange shafts of light on these rocks, and on the thin, grey clouds, is actually composed of a thick layer of paint spread freely on the grey pigment of the rocks and clouds. The integrity of the middle-distance is maintained as the foreground areas of lake flow easily into the middle-ground areas of rock, which in turn continue into the background with the addition of the element of sky.

In the small paintings, then, Bierstadt manifests a concern for the real in terms of composition. A sense of exact time and place is achieved in these paintings. Although the "precise thing" is not rendered as it would be by a luminist, the effect of the thing itself, particularly in the quality of the light, is established.

In sum, Ludlow's *The Heart of the Continent* provides a useful vehicle of comparison in studying the Western landscapes of Albert Bierstadt. The panoramas demonstrate an overriding concern for the awesome first glance, at the expense of the "thing itself." In many ways, James Jackson Jarves was correct when he attributed Bierstadt's popularity to a concern for bigness on the part of the American culture as a whole. However, it was most likely Bierstadt's peculiar combination of the mammoth and the ideal in the American West which captured the public's attention. The smaller paintings, demonstrating more of a concern for the real, may last longer in the archives of art history, but the giant panoramas will certainly remain as more important indicators of America's vanished image of the West.

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footnotes

1. I am indebted to Professor Barton St. Armand of Brown University and to Stephen Peck for sharing their thoughts on the comparison of painting and literature with me, as well as for their thoughtful readings of the initial draft of this paper.
2. *The Karolik Collection of American Paintings* (Boston, 1949), 74-75.
3. *The Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1939), VII, 345-346.
4. *Ibid.*
5. All page citations refer to Fitz Hugh Ludlow, *The Heart of the Continent* (New York, 1870).
6. Quoted in Hans Huth, *Nature and the American* (Berkeley, 1957), 141.
7. James Thomas Flexner, *That Wilder Image* (Boston, 1961), 296.
8. Bierstadt's paintings cited in this text are: "Rocky Mountains—Landers Peak," 1863 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art); "Mount Whitney," 1875 (Corning, New York, Rockwell Foundation); "View from the Wind River Mountains," 1860 (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts); and "Valley of the Yosemite," 1863 (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts).
9. The Claudian formula is so named for the seventeenth-century French landscapist Claude Lorrain, and refers to landscapes composed of a darkened foreground, a highlighted middle-distance which often contains an expanse of winding water, and a filmy light background.
10. Flexner, 296.
11. For a more detailed discussion of the real and the ideal see Barbara Novak, *American Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1969).