Joslyn Art Museum
Comprehensive Study Lesson Plan

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AMERICAN LANDSCAPES

Focus: Albert Bierstadt, *Dawn at Donner Lake*

Objectives – Students will:

- Create an expressive / Romantic-like landscape composition with either oil paints or watercolors
- Respond to how patrons influenced Bierstadt's work and how he fulfilled the commission for the railroad industrialist.
- Present poems inspired by Bierstadt's paintings.
- Connect with Bierstadt when considering how he changed to fit in with "the times" and compare with their own world.

Suggested Materials: Albert Bierstadt teaching poster, oil painting and watercolor lesson plans (see website), labyrinth folding instructions, examples of Bierstadt paintings, art making supplies

Vocabulary: atmospheric luminism, composition, commission, deforestation, expression, industrialist, labyrinth books, landscape, Romantic, study

Procedure:

- Engage: Pose the question – did you ever have to change the way you do something, your beliefs, or the way you act to fit in with “the times?”

- Art Talk: Bierstadt and his landscape paintings were quite popular during the latter half of the 19th century. Eventually, he tried to change his style to align with what the public seemed to desire, but failed. Discuss or debate whether or not Bierstadt should have changed.

- History: Who was Albert Bierstadt? Refer to resources in the Teacher Support Materials for additional information. [http://goo.gl/717lpF](http://goo.gl/717lpF)

- Aesthetics: How do patrons affect or influence the outcome of the artwork? Bierstadt focused on nature and the beauty of the untouched land. He was commissioned by a railroad industrialist to create a painting of the Donner Lake region. Show students the poster with three versions of it – pointing out the final one. Ask students what is missing from them? Why didn't Bierstadt focus on the railroad considering who commissioned the artwork? Was Bierstadt truly representing what he observed there? Then share with them *View from Donner Summit – Summit Station*, 1867. Photograph by Timothy O'Sullivan [http://goo.gl/rmdZ5E](http://goo.gl/rmdZ5E)

- Production 1: American Landscapes in Oil. Encourage students to create a landscape composition with a focus on spontaneity, expression, and color. Refer to the workshop presented by JK Thorsen at Thursdays for Teachers.

- Production 2: Larger than Life. Have students make their own watercolor versions of mountain landscapes while exploring atmospheric luminism. Refer to the workshop presented by Heath Draney at Thursdays for Teachers.
• **Other:** Bierstadt & Books. Show students how to create simple labyrinth books then create poetry inspired by Bierstadt’s paintings. Set aside some time for a poetry slam. Refer to the workshop presented by Julie Sopscak at Thursdays for Teachers.

• **Close:** Ask students how it is possible to stay true to yourself in a world where you are bombarded with influences? Have students write a note or draw a quick symbol representing their strength. They may choose to share it or keep it private.

**Extensions:**

• **Cultural Connections:** How does progress, like the railroad or the economy, affect the natural world? Refer to Bierstadt’s commissioned artwork of Donner Lake that emphasizes the land rather than the railroad. What is the message of the image? Tie it into a contemporary example – Keystone Pipeline.

• **Fine Arts:** How do artists prepare by doing studies to create the final product? Have students go through the process of starting with a scribble and taking it to the final product. Is the process important? Have them do a project – one with studies and one without. Ask them if one stands out more than the other.

• **Language Arts:** Looking at *Dawn at Donner Lake*, have students write about any topic/person on top of a lightened copy of the artwork with this formula – foreground=future; middle ground=present; background=past.

• **Math:** For elementary students – have students measure the heights of the trees and mountains to compare the differences. For secondary students – tell them about what a critic in *Watson’s Weekly Journal* wrote in 1866 ([http://goo.gl/LLeXUu](http://goo.gl/LLeXUu)). Have students find heights of trees, mountains, and clouds using trigonometry and similar triangles.

• **Science:** Effects of Deforestation. When building the railroad, many trees had to be removed to create the ties and snow sheds. Have students consider what happens to the land when this process occurs.

**Academic Standards & additional resources:**
Available on online version at [www.joslyn.org/education/teachers/thursdays-for-teachers](http://www.joslyn.org/education/teachers/thursdays-for-teachers)
[select Lesson Plans, then Art of the American West]

**About the Artwork:**
Bierstadt was instrumental in shaping the post-Civil War generation’s perceptions of the American West. His paintings’ meticulous details and sublime panoramas convinced Americans and Europeans alike that the Far West was still a rugged, primordial world of unaltered pristine beauty, and his works beckoned Americans to the new land of opportunity.

When Bierstadt was two years old, his family moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, from their rural home near Düsseldorf, Germany. After teaching himself the rudiments of painting, he returned to Düsseldorf in 1853, where he studied in the studios of Andreas Achenbach and Karl Friedrich Lessing, both associated with the Düsseldorf Academy. These masters stressed precise, detailed drawing, high-keyed colors, and large, carefully balanced compositions, which reflected the romanticism of the German philosophers. Because of his training in Düsseldorf, Bierstadt’s style differed from that of the first generation of American landscapists, such as Thomas Cole, who for the most part followed the looser, more atmospheric British style. In 1856 Bierstadt left Düsseldorf and traveled through the Alps and then south to Florence and Rome, where he painted for a year among the city’s large contingent of Americans. Upon his return to Massachusetts in the autumn of 1857, he successfully established himself as an artist of romantic Alpine scenes.

*Dawn at Donner Lake* dates from Bierstadt’s third trip west, when he painted mainly in northern California in the Sierra Nevadas from the summer of 1871 to the fall of 1873. Shortly after his arrival there, he was commissioned by Collis P. Huntington, the railroad magnate, to paint a scene of Donner Lake from its highest vantage point along the route of Huntington’s Central Pacific Railroad. *Dawn at Donner Lake* is most likely one of the views painted in preparation for the later, more expansive panorama. In this work, rocky outcroppings dominate the foreground, with the lake seen in the distance through a veil of morning haze. The discontinuous space from the fore- to background is a further indication of the influence of stereoscopic photography on Bierstadt’s compositions.