Albert Bierstadt was born in Germany, on January 7, 1830 to Henry and Christiane Bierstadt. Two years later, the family immigrated to the United States, settling in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where Bierstadt and his seven siblings spent their childhood. From an early age, Bierstadt was interested in painting; learning on his own, at seven years old, he returned to Germany intent on studying with his uncle, Johann Peter Hasenclever, a well-respected artist. Due to Hasenclever's sudden death before his arrival, Bierstadt studied at the Düsseldorf School of Painting. Instead of less than a year of formal training, Bierstadt worked through copying paintings to help him to some of the great landscape paintings of the 19th century. Throughout the 1850s, Bierstadt continued his work on both European and American landscapes. He traveled through the United States, spending a considerable amount of time in California where he received several commissions. Moreover, once the Transcontinental Railroad was completed, he was able to transport his work more easily. A great many early 19th-century painters traveled extensively to paint and Bierstadt's work was no exception. His early success as a landscape painter was based on his paintings' rich colors and extensive detail as well as his ability to create a sense of grandeur.

During his third trip west in 1871, Albert Bierstadt studied the Sierra Nevada Mountains, spending extensive time in the northern part of the range, which he was able to transport his work more easily. A great many early 19th-century painters traveled extensively to paint and Bierstadt's work was no exception. His early success as a landscape painter was based on his paintings’ rich colors and extensive detail as well as his ability to create a sense of grandeur. His paintings of the American West were so popular that he was able to charge high prices for them. His work was highly prized by the wealthy and he was able to support his family in this way. His paintings were also featured in several exhibitions, including the 1873 National Academy of Design exhibition, where he was awarded a gold medal. He was also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and received several other awards and commissions throughout his career.

American Landscapes

Bierstadt's work is characterized by his vivid use of color and his ability to create a sense of grandeur. His paintings often depict the American West in an idealized manner, with the landscape as the dominant feature. Bierstadt's work was highly prized by the wealthy and he was able to support his family in this way. His paintings were also featured in several exhibitions, including the 1873 National Academy of Design exhibition, where he was awarded a gold medal. He was also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and received several other awards and commissions throughout his career.

European Landscapes

Bierstadt's interest in the European landscape began with his training in Germany and lasted throughout his lifetime as he visited varying terrains across the continent. The artist was fascinated by the magnificent scenery in the Swiss Alps, which he depicted in many of his paintings. He was also interested in the picturesque landscapes of the Netherlands and the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, which he painted in 1874. Bierstadt was interested in the natural beauty of the Earth and his paintings reflect this interest. He was able to transport his work more easily. A great many early 19th-century painters traveled extensively to paint and Bierstadt's work was no exception. His early success as a landscape painter was based on his paintings’ rich colors and extensive detail as well as his ability to create a sense of grandeur. His paintings of the American West were so popular that he was able to charge high prices for them. His work was highly prized by the wealthy and he was able to support his family in this way. His paintings were also featured in several exhibitions, including the 1873 National Academy of Design exhibition, where he was awarded a gold medal. He was also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and received several other awards and commissions throughout his career.

Discussion Questions

What emotion does Dawn at Donner Lake evoke? What aspects of the painting enhance that emotion? Why?

Why do you think Bierstadt painted multiple depictions of Donner Lake? How does Bierstadt's painting of Donner Lake compare to his Mythology artwork? How did Bierstadt's landscape paintings inspire American Western expansion? Do Bierstadt's paintings make you want to visit the places he depicted? Why or why not?

Albert Bierstadt's career was marked by his interest in the American West and his paintings of the region. His work was highly prized by the wealthy and he was able to support his family in this way. His paintings were also featured in several exhibitions, including the 1873 National Academy of Design exhibition, where he was awarded a gold medal. He was also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and received several other awards and commissions throughout his career.

This project is supported by the generous contributions of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Nebraska, Equitable Bank, Gilbert M. and Martha H. Hitchcock Foundation, Mammal Foundation, The James C. Mangumki Grant for Education, Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Community Foundation, Lincoln Financial Foundation, Midlands Community Foundation, Nebraska Arts Council, Nebraska Cultural Endowment, Pacific Life Foundation, Amy L. Scott Family Foundation, and Wells Fargo.