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| <p>Albert Bierstadt, <i>The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak</i>, 1863, oil on canvas, 187 x 307 cm (74 x 121")</p> <p>The picture plane is divided by three horizons into four horizontal sections: the foreground, middle ground, background and sky.</p> | <p>initial analysis</p> <p>The picture combines a documentary record, a phenomenological report in front of the landscape and its occupants, with a romanticised view of the encounter which combines the sublime with the beautiful. The Goetzmann brothers note that Bierstadt 'exaggerated the vertical thrust of the ... range to achieve the monumental grandeur which Americans had come to expect from their continent. It is a synthesis ... of a myriad [of] natural facts ...' (see note 2) As indicated in the analysis, the painting also uses proportions of beauty organised by golden section geometry.</p> | <p>The facture of the painting took place in Bierstadt's 10th St New York studio using sketches factured on his first trip West. He accompanied the government's Honey Road Survey Party in December 1858, headed by Frederick W. Lander to the Nebraska Mountains. In the summer of 1859 the party had reached the Wind River range of the Rocky Mountains in Wyoming. The peak in front of them, featured in the painting was named Lander's Peak by Bierstadt following the colonel's death in the Civil War in 1862.</p> |
| <p>The foreground pictures a flat plain occupied by a settlement of Eastern Shoshone indigenous Americans, with tents, horses and dogs, a small mound and trees on the lefthand side and the Wind River in the background which has reflections of the cliffs and waterfall behind and above it both strongly lit from the sun and producing a visual focus. This is emphasised by the visual dip in the range of cliffs and hills in the middle ground, and by the waterfall and its reflection which also mark the vertical division in golden section proportions. The top of the main waterfall marks the horizontal division giving the larger proportion to the upper and sublime part of the painting in contrast to the human scale of the foreground activities. The middle ground pictures a range of granite cliffs and hills with the aforementioned off-centred waterfall in a strong light adding to the focus on this area.</p> <p>The background pictures the Rocky Mountains with Lander's Peak (3,187 m, 10,456 feet) almost directly above the waterfall. Anne F. Hyde described the work as having sharply pointed granite peaks and fantastically illuminated clouds that float above a tranquil, wooded genre scene. (see note 1)</p> <p>The blue sky includes low white clouds, some below the peak of the mountains, and above them a summary layer of brown cloud forms.</p> | <p>Bierstadt writing home from in front of the scene compared what he saw to the Bernese Alps, 'The Italy of America in primitive condition.' The painting was first exhibited in his New York studio to great acclaim and in 1864 exhibited at the New York Metropolitan Fair to raise money for the Union war effort, on the opposite wall to its rival, Frederick Church's <i>Heart of the Andes</i>.</p>  <p>The painting was purchased in 1865 for \$25,000 (equivalent to about \$390,000 in 2018) by James McHenry, an American railway entrepreneur living in London, and was exhibited there to great acclaim. Bierstadt later brought it back and gave or sold it to his brother Edward. It is now owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.</p> | <p>Regarding the Shoshone people Bierstadt writes to the <i>Crayon</i> journal, July 10, 1859, 'The manners and customs of the Indians are still as they were hundreds of years ago, and now is the time to paint them, for they are rapidly passing away, and soon will be known only in history. I think that the artist ought to tell his portion of their history as well as the writer; a combination of both will assuredly render it more complete.' He then adds, 'We have a great many Indian subjects. We were quite fortunate in getting them, the natives not being very willing to have the brass tube pointed at them. Of course they were astonished when we showed them the pictures they did not sit for, and the best we have taken have been obtained without the knowledge of the parties, which is, in fact, the best way to take any portrait.' (see note 2)</p> <p>note 1: Anne F. Hyde. 'Cultural Filters: The Significance of Perception in the History of the American West', Utah State University: <i>The Western Historical Quarterly</i> 24 (3): 351–374, August 1993.</p> <p>note 2: William H and William N. Goetzmann. <i>The West of the Imagination</i>, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986, p.155 and Barbara Novak. <i>Nature and Culture. American Landscape and Painting 1825-75</i>, revised edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.</p> |