

Albert Bierstadt.
Rocky Mountains Lander's Peak, 1863
oil on canvas, 187 x 307 cm (74 x 121")
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



In early 1859 Bierstadt accompanied a government survey expedition, the 'Honey Road Survey Party' headed by Frederick W. Lander, to the Nebraska Territory. Lander was a transcontinental United States explorer, general in the Union army during the American Civil War, and a prolific poet. By summer 1859, the party had reached the Wind River Range of the Rocky Mountains in what is now Wyoming. Bierstadt dubbed the central mountain in the picture Lander's Peak following the colonel's death in the Civil War in 1862. This was one of a number of large works painted after Bierstadt's return from these travels. It is based on very many sketches factured during the expedition. It was completed in 1863, exhibited to great acclaim, and purchased in 1865 for the then-astounding sum of \$25,000 by James McHenry, an American railway entrepreneur living in London. Bierstadt later bought it back and gave or sold it to his brother Edward.

The landscape in the painting is in three sections. In the foreground section an encampment of Shoshone indigenous Americans on a flat plain beside a lake, a middle ground showing upper ground elements of the Wind River and in the background Lander's Peak with a summit of 10,456 feet (3,187 m) in range of the Rocky Mountains. Anne F. Hyde described the work as having sharply pointed granite peaks and fantastically illuminated clouds that float above a tranquil, wooded genre

scene.¹ In a letter by Bierstadt from July 10, 1859, which *The Crayon*, an art magazine, published in September 1859, he commented on the Shoshone people he saw ‘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 ... 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.’ In 2007 Hine & Faragher noted ‘The landscape in the painting is not the actual landscape as it appears at Lander's Peak, but rather an ideal landscape based on nature, altered by Bierstadt for dramatic effect.’²

¹ Anne F. Hyde. ‘Cultural Filters: The Significance of Perception in the History of the American West’, Utah State University: *The Western Historical Quarterly* **24** (3): 351–374, August 1993.

² Robert V. Hine and John Mack. *Frontiers: A Short History of the American West*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2007.