

8-A Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California, 1865

Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902)



8-A Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California, 1865*. Oil on canvas, 64 ½ x 96 ½ in. (163.83 x 245.11 cm.). Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Ala. (1991.879). Gift of the Birmingham Public Library.

The Art

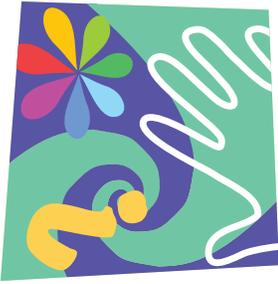
This oil painting of the Yosemite Valley was done on a very large canvas—five feet by eight feet. At a time when few Americans other than American Indians had traveled west of the Mississippi River, this painting gave people a picture of one of the natural wonders on the other side of the country. The painting shows a wide view of the valley that is washed in golden sunlight as it breaks through the clouds. The painting does not have any people in it. Since most Americans had not seen California, they were amazed by the mountains and scenery in the artist's paintings. In this painting, you can see the granite blocks known as "El Capitan" on the right of the canvas, opposite the point called Sentinel Rock.

The Artist

Albert Bierstadt was born in Germany. He made his first trip to the American West in 1859. Bierstadt painted a series of landscapes that were very popular with people who lived on the East Coast of the United States. He wanted to go back to the West to do more painting but had to wait because the Civil War broke out. In 1863, Bierstadt left Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, heading to California by train, stagecoach, and horseback. When he finally reached California, the landscape was more beautiful than he expected. He thought it was even more beautiful than the things he had seen in Europe, where he was born. *Looking Down Yosemite Valley* shows the artist's own sense of wonder at his first sight of the awesome mountain landscape.

The Historical Perspective

When Bierstadt was painting his pictures of the West, there were no easy ways to get to California from the East Coast. This is why most Americans had not seen the western part of the country. The Yosemite Valley was especially hard to reach. At that time, Americans thought of the western frontier as a place untouched by the Civil War. To them, it was a place that promised a new beginning. Bierstadt had already started this painting of the Yosemite Valley when President Abraham Lincoln set the land aside as a state park. This was the first time the federal government had saved a beautiful piece of land from being developed. When the Transcontinental Railroad was finished, people had a way to get to see the areas they had known only through paintings.



Conversations and Teaching Activities

Head Start Children ages 3 to 5

Encourage children to look closely at the painting—the things that look close and those that look far away. Look at the use of color—light and dark. Introduce new vocabulary related to the mountain scene, to life in the United States long ago, to the use of light in the picture, and to perspective. Find books that relate to the painting.

Describing



- ✓ Where do you see trees reflected in water? Children might say in the middle of the painting.
- ✓ Describe how the rocks look. (The rocks appear rough or weathered.) How do you think they would feel? That's called the texture.
- ✓ Where do you see sunlight?
- ✓ Where are all the people?
- ✓ Ask children to share words they think of when they first see this painting. Write each word on a large piece of paper, pointing out words used more than once. Encourage children to explain what made them think of these words. Notice how many times words that refer to size and splendor are mentioned.

Analyzing and Interpreting



Ask the following questions to stimulate thinking and discussion:

- The name of this painting is *Looking Down Yosemite Valley*. Why do you think it is named that?
- If a person was standing in this scene, about how large or tall would he or she seem? Compare a six-foot-tall person to one of the trees. Can you imagine how a person would feel compared to these mountains?
- Why do things in the painting seem far away? (The artist made objects in the foreground darker, more detailed, and larger than distant ones.)
- Ask children what they see first when they look at this painting. Some children might say the light area in the middle of the scene.
- Are there other things you would like to tell me about this painting? Children might say: I saw mountains in a book; I once climbed a mountain; those mountains look like they'd be really hard to climb; the clouds are so high up.



Connecting and Extending

Introducing Vocabulary

clouds	lake	sky
distance	landscape	sunlight
flat	mountain	valley
haze	steep	



Connecting and Extending continued...

Related Family Literacy Experiences

Parents and children can:

- ✓ look at family photos and talk about the differences they see between the time of the picture and the present.
- ✓ sing the song “She’ll be Comin’ Round the Mountain” while waiting in line or riding in a car or bus.
- ✓ take art materials on a nature walk and choose something to paint.

Related Educational Experiences

- ✓ Tell the children that this painting represents a time way before they were born. Things that happened a long time ago are called history. Things change as years go by. Ask the children what they can say about their own history. Do they know when and where they were born? Do they have older brothers and sisters who were born before they were, or younger brothers and sisters who were born after they were?
- ✓ Ask the children if they remember things that happened when they were younger—trips, family fun, books they



Books

Come Look with Me: Exploring Landscape Art with Children by Gladys S. Blizzard (Thomasson-Grant, 1992)

Discussion questions provide the opportunity to learn about 12 landscape paintings and artists.

Follow the Water from Brook to Ocean by Arthur Dorros (HarperCollins Publishers, 1993)

Find out how water flows from brooks to streams and rivers, over waterfalls, through canyons and dams, and eventually to the ocean.

How Mountains Are Made by Kathleen Weidner Zoehfeld (HarperCollins Publishers, 1995)

Learn about all the different kinds of mountains.

Little Cloud by Eric Carle (Penguin Young Readers, 1998)

A little cloud becomes a sheep, an airplane, trees, a hat—before joining other clouds and raining.

Two Bear Cubs: A Miwok Legend from California’s Yosemite Valley by Robert D. San Souci (Yosemite Association, 1997)

According to legend, a worm saves two bear cubs stranded atop the rock, El Capitan.



read, etc. Do they remember buildings, stores, or other things that used to be in their neighborhoods and aren’t there anymore? Are there buildings, stores, or other things that weren’t in their neighborhoods before but are there now? Those things are all their history. Ask the children to draw a picture or do a journal about their own history.

- ✓ Talk about what it would be like to live in a place like Yosemite Valley. Were there lots of people around to play with? Were there stores to shop in? Parks to play in? Things to play with?
- ✓ Talk about the different kinds of clouds (cirrus, cumulus, nimbus) and what they look like.

The ideas listed are just a few of the many activities that could be used to introduce or extend children’s learning. Your knowledge of your children and families supports your ability to ensure positive learning experiences and outcomes for students. As an educator, you probably have ideas for books, songs, finger plays, and activities that you have thought of when introducing or extending children’s learning related to the “A Head Start on Picturing America” artworks. We encourage you to confer with your colleagues, visit the local library or bookstore, and share your ideas with others.