The Rockies & the Alps: Bierstadt, Calame, & the Romance of the Mountains

by Tricia Laughlin Bloom & Katherine Manthorne

Since the emergence of the Hudson River School in the early nineteenth century, American art has had a close relationship with the soil. For artists taking the vast and largely unexplored American landscape as their subject, an in-depth knowledge of the terrain became an important sign of authenticity that helped fuel a national passion for the great outdoors. For artists commonly associated with this movement—Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), Thomas Cole (1801-1848), Worthington Whittredge (1820-1910) and John Kensett (1816-1872), to name a few—excursions into the unexplored mountains of the American West and the Alps involved traversing challenging routes and embracing new equipment and physical tests required for mountaineering and high-altitude hiking, while meticulously observing and recording the resplendent details of the natural environment. These traveler artists produced a diverse body of work documenting the great mountain ranges of the Rockies and the Alps, still largely unknown to most at that time.

The Rockies and the Alps: Bierstadt, Calame, and the Romance of the Mountains is on view through August 19, 2018, at the Newark Museum, 49 Washington Street, Newark, New Jersey, 07102, 973-596-6500, www.newarkmuseum.org. A 175-page catalogue, co-authored by the exhibition's curators, Tricia Laughlin Bloom and Katherine Manthorne, with contributions from Patricia Mainardi and James M. Saslow, has been published by the Newark Museum and D Giles Limited to accompany the exhibition.

The Rockies and The Alps: Bierstadt, Calame and the Romance of the Mountains takes a unique transnational look at changing perceptions and experiences of the mountains in the United States and in Europe during a critical period, from the 1830s to the 1870s, when artists, scientists, tourists, and armchair travelers were all awakening to the attractions of mountain scenery. This same period also saw the invention of photography and the prolifera-
LEFT: John Singer Sargent, *Camping Near Lake O'Hara*, 1916, w/c on paper, 25 x 30\(\frac{1}{2}\)\, Newark Museum; purchase 1957 Felix Fuld Bequest Fund.

RIGHT: Alexandre Calame, *Rocky Path*, 1860, o/c, 9\(\frac{5}{8}\) x 10\(\frac{1}{2}\), Asbjorn Lundt.

ABOVE: Albert Bierstadt, *Western Landscape*, 1869, o/c, 36 x 54, Newark Museum; purchase 1961 The Members’ Fund.

The use of landscape imagery as mass culture and entertainment, popularized through print media, stereoscopes, and magic lantern slides. By considering some of the most iconic American landscape paintings alongside the works of the Swiss painter Alexandre Calame (1810-1864), his teacher François Diday (1802-1877), and other leading European painters who helped foster an appreciation of the mountains, *The Rockies and the Alps* reveals that the landscape paintings that have become archetypal symbols of American nature and...
nationalism were in fact the product of a multi-faceted and ongoing dialogue between these American and European painters. The rare opportunity for comparisons between masterworks from the American art collection of the Newark Museum and loans from distinguished private and public collections presents a rich story of artistic exchange and creative reuse of the lessons of the Old World and the New. Moreover, the variety of media in the exhibition, which includes a range of photographic technologies, prints and drawings, and natural history specimens from the Newark Museum's science collection, allows a fuller sense of the marketplace of ideas and images in which these paintings were received.

The comparison of North America's western mountains to those of Europe was
a common practice in the nineteenth century, a way of claiming that America, too, had breathtaking views and its own unique history. As Bierstadt himself wrote on his first trip to the Rockies in 1859, "The mountains are very fine; as seen from the plains, they resemble very much the Bernese Alps..." Similar comparisons can be found in the descriptive text featured on stereograph cards from the period, one of which calls Mount Sir Donald in the Canadian Rockies "the Matterhorn of the North American Alps." Bierstadt and others made use of photographic technologies like stereography in the making of their paintings and found them useful in cultivating audiences for mountain imagery. While these new media had many uses for artists, the ability to produce vivid and faithful impressions in the form of plein air sketches was a critical part of exploring and documenting both the Rockies and the Alps in the nine-
teenth century. Hudson River School artists approached their journeys into nature like field researchers, travelling through uncharted territories and making as many sketches as possible in a range of states—small, rapidly executed works on paper and larger fully realized sketches in oil—that they took back to their studios to combine and elaborate into grandly scaled finished paintings.

The goal of achieving a quasi-scientific level of accuracy spurred these artists to push the limits of their physical and artistic abilities, and to be broad and acquisitive in their gathering of specimens from the natural environment, which Native Americans were considered to be part of.

Bierstadt’s encyclopedic attention to detail extended beyond the landscape itself to include the plants, animals and indigenous people that were viewed as a part of the Western landscape. In keeping with the spirit of scientific exploration and ethnographic study that defined the era, Bierstadt was also a collector of indigenous art. During his trips to the West Bierstadt collected Native American artifacts which he then displayed in his New York City studio and in public exhibitions of his paintings.

Alexandre Calame’s Alpine landscape practice paralleled that of the Hudson River School artists. He spent his summers painting outdoors among the mountains of the Bernese Oberland and central Switzerland, where he produced sketches and drawings with great attention to detail, that he later employed in the execution of studio compositions. His Calvinist conviction
that the forms of nature conveyed Divine power found immediate resonance with Americans. His work also offered a powerful example of synthetic landscape vision, in which the refinement and combination of real and imagined elements is not only legitimate for an artist but a key tool in the making of a poetic landscape art. Studying Calame's work, Bierstadt's concept of landscape art as the product of observation, compositional invention and technical expertise was confirmed. He determined to master these skills in his European scenes, which he then applied to the Rockies and Sierras. While he never copied Calame directly, Bierstadt did clearly learn from the Swiss master the ability to compose pictures from a set of building blocks—preconceived motifs and elements—from which he would pick and choose for reassembly in a given picture, whether the Alps or the Rockies. When Bierstadt returned home from his own European trav-
ABOVE: Albert Bierstadt, *View in the Yosemite*, 1864, o/paper mounted on canvas, 25 1/4 x 19, Algernon A. Phillips, M.D.

LEFT: Gabriel Loppé, *View of Mont Blanc*, nineteenth century, o/c, 19 x 14, Asbjorn Lunde.

BELOW LEFT: Alexandre Calame, *Mountain Torrent Before a Storm (The Aare River, Haddest)*, 1850, o/c, 38 5/8 x 54 1/4, Asbjorn Lunde.

RIGHT: Johann Gottfried Steffan, *Near Meringen (The Weisshorn)*, 1846, o/c, 13 1/2 x 14, Asbjorn Lunde.

cs and organized an art exhibition in 1858 in New Bedford, Massachusetts, he featured a painting by Calame: an acknowledgment of the Swiss artist’s importance to his own work and ultimately to the American landscape school.

To nineteenth-century painters of both the Rockies and the Alps, the new science of geology was a valuable asset and a shaping influence on their portrayal of rocky and glacial forms. The works of Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) and Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) offered new modes of understanding mountain scenery, and even helped cultivate broader audiences for paintings of this subject matter. Agassiz was one of Calame’s strong supporters and one of the first to bring knowledge of the artist to the United States. Like Calame, Agassiz was born in the shadow of the Swiss Alps, where he climbed mountain-tops and lowered himself into the crevasses of glaciers in search of evidence to support
his concept of the Ice Age. Arguing that the world at several points in its vast history was covered with large fields of ice, he theorized about how glaciers moved down mountain slopes, carrying huge boulders with them, carving terrain as they went. His published books such as *Etudes sur les glaciers* (1840) featured beautiful illustrations, including alpine scenes by Calame, to convey his ideas of moving glaciers, shaping the face of the earth.

The historic importance of the natural sciences to the discipline of mountain painting makes *The Rockies and the Alps* a quintessential exhibition for the Newark Museum to organize. Since its incorporation in 1909, the institution has collected geological, botanical, and biological specimens alongside global art collections. Newark's American landscape holdings in particular have grown to be one of the leading collections of its kind. With its democratic and interdisciplinary mission and through the breadth of its collections, conceived and nurtured by encyclopedic collectors and curators and an engaged public, the Newark Museum intended to create an essentially American museum where the study and appreciation of art and science would thrive and grow, and so it has. *The Rockies and the Alps*, with its stunning array of alpine paintings, sketches, handwritten notes, and natural science specimens culled from the earth by nineteenth-century travelers, reflects well the character of the Museum's collections and its mission to value both nature and culture, fine art and material culture, in balance.