Art, Agency, and Conservation
A FRESH LOOK AT
ALBERT BIERSTADT’S
VISION OF THE WEST
by Peter H. Hassrick
Throughout the summer of 1888, people riding the ferry between New York City and Staten Island frequently rubbed shoulders with Albert Bierstadt going to and from a day’s work on the grounds of William F. Cody’s Wild West exhibition, then encamped at Evastina, New York. As fellow artist Jervis McEntee, who rode the ferry with Bierstadt one day, recalled, Bierstadt kept his sketch box and brushes in a special room set aside for him by Buffalo Bill, where he was making “sketches as he is painting a Buffalo hunt” [Fig. 1]. That painting was one or perhaps both of the versions of The Last of the Buffalo [detail, page 3; full image, page 24]. Bierstadt intended to create two history paintings set in an expanse of mountain meadows surrounded by snow-capped peaks and thickly populated with wildlife and Indian hunters. Today, one belongs to the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming, and the other is in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. The National Gallery’s work is about one foot larger in height and width.

Albert Bierstadt has long been recognized as one of America’s premier nineteenth-century painters of the western landscape. His vast canvases of Rocky Mountain and Sierra vistas have been widely lauded by some art historians as the quintessential grand-manner national pictures and countenanced by others as somewhat overwrought exercises in the pictorial legacy of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny. Rarely discussed are the painter’s admiration for northern plains Indians and wildlife conservation and his preservationist bent. The Last of the Buffalo paintings, completed in 1889—turn out to be the artist’s final triumphs. They express the artist’s genuine concern for Native people of the West, wildlife conservation, national park management and ethos, and the national and international stature of “old school” American art values at the close of the nineteenth century. In a sense, to produce the new The Last of the Buffalo canvases was also a way for Bierstadt to revive his reputation.

When Bierstadt entered the West for the first time in 1859, he was preceded on his overland route by only one other accomplished Anglo artist, Alfred Jacob Miller, who hazarded a journey west along the Platte River to Fort Laramie and then farther to the Sweetwater River and the Wind River Mountains with Captain William Drummond Stewart in 1837. By the time Bierstadt took that route twenty-two years later in the company of the road surveyor Colonel Frederick Lander, it had become the Oregon Trail, a well-worn track he shared that summer with some nineteen thousand other travelers. Even so, it was an adventure filled with opportunity as well as hardships, uncertainties, and challenges. The art critic Henry Tuckerman in discussing Bierstadt’s trip concluded, “Adventure is an element of American artist-life which gives it singular zest and interest,” and noted that Bierstadt’s quest for adventure was legendary.

In 1859, Bierstadt was fresh from studies in Dusseldorf, where he had associated with American and German landscape artists, figure painters, specialists in historical allegory, and a couple of painters, Carl Wimar and Henry Lewis, who focused on rendering American Indians. His hometown newspaper reported that before

Born in 1830, Albert Bierstadt (right, circa 1870) traveled throughout the West in 1859, 1863, and 1881, creating impressionistic portrayals of the landscapes, wildlife, and indigenous inhabitants he encountered. His resulting works helped influence late 1800s conservation policies, including protections for bison in Yellowstone National Park.
Bierstadt embarked on his travels the artist intended “to study the scenery of that wild region, and the picturesque facts of Indian life.” He was not certain what direction he wanted to steer his nascent career, but he did know that he would, if nothing else, find relatively unexplored material for his brushes in Nebraska and Oregon Territories. Upon his arrival, another subject seems to have captured his fancy—the bison. While painting among the Sioux, Pawnee, Arapaho, Kansa, and Shoshone, he recognized that the lives of Indians and bison were easily and appropriately conflated. His one surviving sketchbook from that year contains seventeen drawings of bison, including Buffalo Head [Fig. 2]. Several group oil studies of Indians, including Four Portraits of North American Indians [Fig. 3], were painted at the same time. Collectively, these images reveal Bierstadt’s understanding of the essential primacy of Indians and bison as artistic

Fig. 1. Head of Buffalo and Indian, 1888 (oil on paper, 14” x 19”) Created in 1888 while Bierstadt worked on the grounds of William F. Cody’s Wild West, this small oil sketch demonstrates the artist’s awareness that bison and Plains Indians shared an intertwined existence and fate.

Meat dries in this 1880 Crow hunting camp scene. Bison were the staple of Plains tribes' economies and featured prominently in their spiritual traditions.
Fig. 2. **Buffalo Head**, c. 1859 (oil on paper, framed 5½" × 8")

During his first visit west, in 1859, Bierstadt developed an artistic interest in bison, whose numbers were still plentiful on the Plains although already greatly diminished west of the Rockies. A sketchbook from this journey includes this image. Like Karl Bodmer and George Catlin in the 1830s, Bierstadt created multiple studies of Plains Indians, including the portrait of four Indian men below.

Fig. 3. **Four Portraits of North American Indians**, 1859 (oil on gray prepared paper, 14" × 19")
The sheer exhilaration of watching a bison hunt captivated Bierstadt, and some of his early western paintings portrayed Native hunters pursuing their quarry on horseback before dramatic mountainous backdrops.

Subjects and suggest he was an astute witness to the ineluctable bond they shared at a time when both Native people and wildlife appeared to be increasingly endangered.

Uncertain if he would become a figure painter, an animal painter, or a landscapist, Bierstadt tried combining two and sometimes all three as he considered the studio works that would result from his photographing and sketching in the field. His earliest grand painting, Base of the Rocky Mountains, Laramie Peak (destroyed by fire in the late 1920s), was a mélange of these salient themes. A smaller, exquisite studio work that survives today—Big Sandy River [Fig. 4], painted in 1860—shows a similar scene, combining a view of the Wind River Mountains farther west with a Shoshone hunt in progress. It joins the ecstasy of the nation’s most exalted peaks with the exoticism and thrill of the chase.

Bierstadt’s second masterwork of his initial western experience was a “Great Picture.” Completed in 1863, The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak [Fig. 5] measured over 6 feet by 10 feet in size. By definition, paintings of this genre were of vast scale and valued highly in the marketplace. They traveled to several venues to be viewed by public audiences and were typically engraved or lithographed so that relatively inexpensive versions might be available to patrons of lesser means. This one portrayed a vibrant group of Shoshone Indians encamped beneath what Bierstadt called Lander’s Peak (today known as Temple Peak) in the southern Wind River Range. Its majesty and awe-inspiring subjects garnered many accolades when it was first displayed in 1864. One critic regarded it as deserving “to take rank among the highest existing productions of American landscape art.” Others applauded the fact that it appropriately combined...
Indians with the landscape, saying that these elements gave voice and meaning to the composition.7

For the most part, however, the critics demurred on the painting’s merits. One, writing for the New York art and literary magazine The Round Table, was representative of the collective disfavor. He wrote that

Mr. Bierstadt’s subject . . . is marred in its impression of solitary grandeur by the introduction of an Indian encampment in the foreground. For an incident which is merely one of the accidents of the place, the artist has sacrificed the greatest element of his subject; he has sacrificed sublimity of impression to variety of interest. This is one of the serious aesthetic faults of Mr. Bierstadt’s treatment.

Other arbiters of taste followed. James Jackson Jarves, for example, claimed that the painting appeared to be “confused,” with the Indians “detracting from its principal features, besides making it liable to the artistic objection of two pictures in one.”8

For Bierstadt, the Indians were far from being “accidents of the place.” He and Lander had savored their association with them and developed genuine personal affinity for Native people. In Wolf River, Kansas [Fig. 6], Bierstadt pictured a Kansa encampment enveloped in glorious suffused light, with the grand cottonwoods serving as the divine sanctuary of nature’s fondest embrace. The Anglo intruder is relegated to the shadows. To Bierstadt, these indigenous inhabitants made the West complete, sharing a dual province with glorious nature. Nonetheless, he seems to have taken the criticism to heart. Subsequent “Great Pictures” made after an
Fig. 6. Wolf River, Kansas, c. 1859 (oil on paper, 48 ¼" x 38 ¾")

Bierstadt’s western paintings influenced later artists such as Charlie Russell and Frederic Remington, whose works also reveal an affinity for wildlife and Native peoples as artistic motifs.
1863 excursion to California's Yosemite Park and the Northwest Coast were essentially devoid of Indians as prime subjects.

One smaller painting thought to date from his post-Yosemite experience is something of an exception. That oil painting carries the title of *Buffalo Hunt* [Fig. 7] today. In its fresh coloring, iridescent atmosphere, and precipitous topographical features, the painting suggests the full poetic grandeur of Yosemite, with a human element in the form of a buffalo chase. The spear-wielding Indian and the small group of bison both race toward a beautifully highlighted stream. The combined rush of the protagonists punctuates the lyrical mood of the picture with, as one art historian has phrased it, "an act of heroic engagement." Thought to have been painted around 1865, *Buffalo Hunt* may have been associated with an appeal the artist made at the time to have Congress consider two large landscape and history murals for the nation's capitol. One would picture Yosemite Valley and the other, he wrote to his Washington contact, "might represent scenery of the Rocky Mts. showing in the foreground something of Indian life." The idea gained no traction, and the murals were never commissioned.

Although Bierstadt adjusted his priorities to accommodate the whims of the nation's art and taste arbiters, he did not ignore what was happening in the West. While painting his grand Rocky Mountain masterpiece in 1862, the artist initiated efforts to retrace his earlier steps along the Oregon Trail. Unfortunately, fighting between Indians and U.S. military forces broke out west of Fort Laramie, so he was unable to obtain a letter of authorization from the secretary of war to travel in the region. Indians defending their homelands were perhaps less inter-
esting to an artist who wanted to see them as harmonious elements of nature, not the mythically savage resisters of Manifest Destiny. The ongoing conflicts between tribes and the United States revealed a reality to which Bierstadt eventually conceded after the mural project evaporated: the Indian of his memory was vanishing. When Bierstadt elected to focus on the bison as a subject after 1865, he did so not simply as a replacement but as a way of uniting his understanding of Plains Indians and the bison into one symbolic construct.

A sequence of works began to unfold on Bierstadt’s easel in 1867 with the creation of his seminal prairie landscape *The Buffalo Trail* [Fig. 8]. A writer for *The Ladies’ Repository* magazine had commented the year before on Bierstadt’s apparently “happy facility which he possessed of ingratiating himself with the Indians” and had noted his “remarkable intimacy with their habits and modes of life which forms so interesting a feature in his pictures of those wild regions [that] substantially defined him as a painter.” Now he was transferring those skills to the observation of the buffalo. *The Buffalo Trail* is a refreshing reverie, heavenly oriented and august in its celebratory exaltation of what would become the most iconic creature in the pantheon of America’s wildlife. In it, the bison cross a tranquil river (probably the Platte in the new state of Nebraska) onto a fresh, Edenic shore ready to partake of the verdant meadow grasses spread before them. The trees are magisterial, the waters calming, and the light hints at a revelatory moment. The bison’s endurance as a species is implicit.

Such idyllic peace was quickly fading. The government’s reservation system was formalized by President Ulysses Grant in 1869, and Native people were being systematically robbed of their land by...
Many historians consider Yosemite as the model for the world’s first national park despite the fact that the Yosemite Grant Act of June 30, 1864, put the responsibility for administering the new park on the state of California. As a conservation-minded artist, Bierstadt influenced this major preservation effort by making the case (artistically) for Yosemite’s grandeur.15

In 1863, Bierstadt, with his friend Fitz Hugh Ludlow, a brilliant travel writer, spent seven weeks in the Yosemite Valley. Ludlow described his impression of that place in the Atlantic Monthly, suggesting Yosemite was the “original site of the Garden of Eden” and “the sacred closet of Nature’s self-examination.”16

Bierstadt was also close friends with several of the people who had been pressing for Yosemite to be set aside for the benefit of the public. The first person to welcome them to California and the last person to bid them farewell some months later was Yosemite’s prime advocate, the nationally adored preservationist preacher Thomas Starr King. The influential Jessie Fremont, who lobbied Congress to save Yosemite (and was later a major patron of the artist), was a friend of Bierstadt’s, and Bierstadt and Ludlow camped with Galen Clark, the legendary early protector and promoter of the Mariposa Grove and Yosemite. Bierstadt even painted Clark into his majestic The Great Trees, Mariposa Grove, California.17

Probably the first oil Bierstadt completed after returning from Yosemite was a small work, considered an enhanced field study, titled Valley of the Yosemite [Fig. 9], which was exhibited at the New York Sanitary Fair in April 1864. There, in a benefit auction for wounded Union soldiers, it commanded

Fig. 9. Valley of the Yosemite, 1864 (oil on paperboard, 11 5/8” × 19 3/4”)

Valley of the Yosemite demonstrates Bierstadt’s exalted and noble use of color as an aesthetic palliative to help salve the wounds of a nation consumed by war—no doubt a fact not lost on the purchaser who paid a handsome price for the small painting at a Union soldier benefit in 1864.
Bierstadt visited California in 1863 in the company of travel writer Fitz Hugh Ludlow (above). Like Bierstadt, Ludlow revered Thomas Starr King, who championed the idea of the area’s preservation as a national reserve.

The works of photographer Carleton Watkins, a contemporary of Bierstadt’s, brought public and political attention to the grandeur of Yosemite’s landscape. Images such as this circa 1865 photograph of Mirror Lake reputedly influenced Congress and President Abraham Lincoln to establish Yosemite as a protected area administered by the state of California and thereby laid the groundwork for the creation of the nation’s first park, Yellowstone.

the highest price of any single work, $1,600. That sale, which went to James Lenox, one of New York’s most prominent art and rare book collectors, was noted in the New York Post. The New York Times quoted a reporter who, after watching Bierstadt work in Yosemite, had claimed the artist “fairly led the valley away captive” with his remarkable sketches.  

One of the nation’s leading Bierstadt scholars, Nancy Anderson, has suggested that Bierstadt played no direct part in the park’s inception. Most students of the area assign credit to the photographer Carleton Watkins, whose work Bierstadt collected and whom he referred to as “the Prince of Photographers.” Watkins displayed a selection of his dramatic, mammoth plate photographs and stereo-views in New York’s prominent Goupil’s Art Gallery in December 1862. Their commanding beauty and wide promotion made the photographs instrumental in persuading Congress to pass the Yosemite Park legislation. One Watkins expert has even suggested that a set of his photographs was supplied to the White House, where President Abraham Lincoln enjoyed them before signing the Yosemite Grant Act into law.

Yet, given Bierstadt’s lofty reputation in 1864, his works must have had some influence in the establishment of the park. Ludlow’s article was published the same month as the Yosemite Grant Act was passed, and Lincoln paid close attention to the many Sanitary Fairs around the country, as they were generously supportive to the Union cause.
Throughout the 1860s, the United States negotiated treaties pressuring tribes to make land cessions to accommodate settlers flooding into the West. Many Americans viewed Indians as relics of a past era and expected them to make way for "civilization" and progress, as this engraving suggests.

The construction of the transcontinental railroad eventually brought droves of hide hunters into the West. But while the line was being built, the railroad companies ushered tourists into the West to seek amusement in mindless slaughter.
treaties, warfare, and forced displacement. The West was also being invaded by opportunists and entrepreneurs of all sorts who wanted to exploit its resources, while the biggest technological advance of the nineteenth century, the transcontinental railroad, was about to transect the region permanently, splitting the great bison herds and severely threatening their existence. By then, unstinting pressure to eliminate the bison in order to make Indians surrender to reservation life was already much in force on the southern plains.

In 1869, the year that the rails effectively brought the Pacific and Atlantic shores together for the first time, Bierstadt began painting a powerfully prescient sequel to *The Buffalo Trail*. He called it *The Buffalo Trail: The Impending Storm* [Fig. 10]. In it, trees are no longer magisterial; rather, they bow in the menacing, portentous wind. Buffalo hunch their backs against an approaching storm and retreat to an uncertain refuge on the farther shore. Instead of crossing the river to nourish themselves, they seek scant protection among the trees and unwelcoming, rocky cliffs. Unlike *The Buffalo Trail*, this work denotes ominous vulnerability. Indeed, just a few years later, a traveler lamented the dramatic change wrought by the hide trade, saying, "[W]here we saw buffalo in May 1872, by the uncounted thousands, we now [in 1874] looked in vain. . . . So disappears
Fig. 10. The Buffalo Trail: 
The Impending Storm, 1869 (oil on canvas, 
29 1/2" x 49 1/2")

The optimism suggested in 
Bierstadt's 1867 painting 
The Buffalo Trail [Fig. 8] 
faded quickly as the artist 
confronted the sweeping 
changes taking place. In 
1869, he created a sequel: 
The Buffalo Trail: The 
Impending Storm (right). 
Using bison as a symbol for 
the once vast herds and the 
Indians who hunted them, 
Bierstadt conveyed that both 
appeared doomed, one to 
extinction and the other to 
cultural insignificance.
Throughout the early 1870s, western Kansas Territory produced several million bison hides, making it one of the most lucrative hunting locations; thus Western Kansas presents what was quickly becoming a nostalgic view of the unspoiled West. Exhibited at an 1876 centennial celebration, Bierstadt's idyllic painting suggests what America was sacrificing in the name of progress.

Around Dodge City and the surrounding Kansas area alone, a reputed 3,158,730 buffalo were killed by hide hunters between the years 1872 and 1874.

By 1874, even supposed preserves for wild game such as Yellowstone National Park were feeling the effects. Calling for a retreat to at least the boundaries of the park, one naturalist bemoaned the animal's "wholesale slaughter" on the plains and hoped that the park might serve as a place for "preservation from extinction of . . . the characteristic mammals" like the buffalo. That protection would be a long time coming and face stiff opposition from politicians who viewed both bison and Indians as obstacles to American expansion. Just two years after Yellowstone's creation, Michigan's representative voiced that counterpoint in testimony to Congress:

There is no law which humans can write, there is no law which a Congress of men can enact, that will stay the disappearance of these wild animals before civilization. They eat the grass. They trample upon the plains which our settlers desire to herd their cattle and sheep. . . . They destroy the pasture. They are as uncivilized as the Indians.

When Americans celebrated their centennial two years later, Bierstadt chose an elegiac tribute to the buffalo as one of his works to be exhibited in Philadelphia's Centennial International Exhibition. The painting was appropriately titled Western Kansas [Fig. 11], suggesting a location that was central to the hide trade and the unprecedented slaughter of the buffalo. It is not known how this portrayal was received by the public, but the organizers were sufficiently impressed to select it as one of a few images to illustrate the exhibition's catalogue. The three paintings, hung side by side, serve as a triptych, revealing in this traditionally deific format a message of birth, uncertainty, and demise for the buffalo.

By the early 1880s, it looked as if the buffalo would become extinct in the United States, dipping from 10 million or more to near zero since Bierstadt had first gone west. Yet a flicker of hope remained for their survival: Yellowstone National Park. The original Yellowstone Act of 1872 had provided only marginally for the protection of wildlife by banning "wanton
destruction of the fish and game within said park, and against their capture and destruction for the purpose of merchandise or profit.” Recreational hunting within the park’s limits generally went unchecked, but it was poaching that truly devastated the herds. In addition to killing for hides, hunters shot bison for their heads and sold them to taxidermists outside the park to be mounted and resold to tourists. The stuffed heads were also common decoration for hotel lobbies, train depot waiting rooms, and saloons. “The Park is overrun by skin hunters, who slaughter the game for their hides,” wrote eminent preservationist George Bird Grinnell, the editor of Forest and Stream, in late 1882. If the park were properly guarded, he suggested, it could readily be made into a sanctuary “for the larger wild animals which will otherwise, before long, become extinct.”

Shortly after Grinnell’s pronouncement, a similar alarm was sounded from a most unlikely source—William F. Cody. As a former market hunter for
Bierstadt's 1881 visit to the West included a tour of Yellowstone Park, after which he created this painting of Yellowstone Falls. The painting was displayed at the White House, where it captured the imagination of President Chester A. Arthur. Convincing policy makers and the public that conservation measures were necessary involved increasing their appreciation for the park's beauty and raising awareness of the plight of its bison.
railroad crews in the 1860s, Buffalo Bill had killed several thousand buffalo, but in an 1883 article titled “Game in the Yellowstone Park” in the New York Sun, Buffalo Bill condemned the past decade of carnage. “Their slaughter has been criminally large and useless,” he railed. “No hand is raised to stop the utter extinction which threatens them. Even their bones have been raked and shipped East as a new source of profit.” Cody seemed especially upset over what he called “indiscriminate hunting” in the park, claiming that the poaching must be “deplored.” This was even after Congress, in an unprecedented and surprising expression of generosity, appropriated money to hire a dozen park “assistant superintendents” in 1883 to help address myriad crises including ongoing bison depredation. Nonetheless, both Cody and Grinnell saw that Yellowstone Park—if managed for conservation—was the bison’s last best refuge. Convincing the public and policy makers that conservation measures were needed if America was not to lose the bison involved building an appreciation for the mighty animals as an essential component of the park.

In 1881, Bierstadt visited Yellowstone and produced many wonderful sketches that reveal the painter’s marvel at the sights confronting him over a three-month stay. These sketches were subsequently converted into large studio oils like Yellowstone Falls [Fig. 12]. President Chester A. Arthur was infatuated with Bierstadt’s newest Yellowstone works and in 1882 borrowed Yellowstone Falls and several others for his White House library. Walking past the paintings daily, President Arthur became convinced he should visit the park in person in 1883. As one newspaper put it, “[A]fter a twelve-month’s contemplation of the painted semblance of the ‘Yellowstone Falls,’ the ‘Yellowstone Canyon’ and the ‘Grand Geyser,’ the president made up his mind to go out and see the originals.”

Yet, upon their arrival, Arthur and members of his retinue observed that Yellowstone’s megafauna were essentially absent. “During our whole journey through the Park,” wrote one reporter traveling with the presidential entourage, “not a specimen of large game was seen by anyone.” The elk were said to be “back up on the mountains,” and the buffalo seemed to have vanished altogether. “The law prohibits shooting more than is necessary for one’s own immediate use, and the Superintendent [Philetus Norris] and his twelve assistants scattered throughout the Park are endeavoring to enforce it; but in this mountain clime the rapacious appetite of the hunter is never satisfied,” the reporter observed.

The president’s visit to Yellowstone attracted massive press attention and consequently helped to make the park experience appealing to the public while simultaneously calling attention to the need for wildlife conservation. Building on this attention, defenders of the park such as Grinnell and Missouri’s Senator George G. Vest immediately pressed for reforms that would help protect it. As Grinnell wrote...
soon after the president returned home, “The trip . . . has already, as we predicted last summer would be the case, resulted in action for the proper preservation of the Park.” Bierstadt’s magnificent works of art had helped engage the nation in pondering conservation issues and nudged public perception of the park’s wildlife as a resource worthy of preservation.

In 1888, Bierstadt was invited to become a charter member of the Boone & Crockett Club. The club’s president was Theodore Roosevelt and its publicist George Bird Grinnell. One had a strong political voice and the other a broad editorial platform. The members determined at their first meeting in January 1888 to seek methods of exerting pressure on Congress to protect the wonders of the park. They especially wanted to protect the bison and prevent

**William T. Hornaday**

It has been asserted that Bierstadt’s 1889 *The Last of the Buffalo* paintings may have been the impetus for the first census of the American bison, thus lending the works extra significance. This is not true. It was, in fact, William T. Hornaday, the chief taxidermist of the Smithsonian Institution, who published a report, “The Extermination of the American Bison,” in 1887, that included a rough estimate of 635 surviving bison. This depressing census may have reached Bierstadt’s attention but was two years too early to suggest that *The Last of the Buffalo* could have influenced it.

By the mid-1880s, Hornaday had become aware of the bison’s vulnerability, but he was neverthe-

Credited with facilitating the first bison census, William T. Hornaday of the Smithsonian Institution reported in 1887 that out of uncountable millions only 635 remained. Hornaday insisted on killing over two dozen of those remaining few in order to feature them in his museum. This photograph is labeled Hornaday’s Bison Exhibit, Mammal Exhibit, National Museum, 1886–1887.
the imminent extinction of the species in the West.\textsuperscript{39} Having endorsed their mission, Bierstadt sought a way to contribute to the effort. He considered that his recollections of the park and his love for wild animals, particularly bison, might guide his brush to make a pair of powerful aesthetic statements in support of their survival.

Both paintings called *The Last of the Buffalo* [Fig. 13] are monumental allegorical canvases.\textsuperscript{31} Despite the breathless sweep of the landscape backdrop in the paintings, they are, in fact, the artist’s acknowledgement that the West was not limitless or invulnerable to change.\textsuperscript{32} By the late 1870s, Yellowstone Park harbored one of the three remnant herds of pure bison stock, whose numbers had declined precipitously to perhaps fewer than three hundred,

less bent on securing specimens of a bull, a cow, and a calf for the museum. In 1886, he traveled to an area near Miles City, Montana Territory, with the mission of shooting twenty buffalo and ended up with twenty-five carcasses. Those trophies were brought back to Washington, D.C., where six were preserved in a glass-case exhibit known as the “Hornaday Bison Group.” Thus, the bison—stuffed and preserved for posterity—became nigh immortal, and the public, through this efficacious presentation, was awakened to the profundity of the concluding tragedy.

Bierstadt and Hornaday probably knew one another, and Hornaday played a critical role in later bison conservation efforts, helping Theodore Roosevelt found the American Bison Society in 1905. Yet Hornaday held a far narrower view of the story than Bierstadt. The artist regarded the saga as an ongoing interaction between Indians and bison. Hornaday, on the other hand, was an inveterate Indian hater, and, while appropriately attributing the bison’s demise to the Anglo hide hunters, he blamed Indians in even larger measure.\textsuperscript{34} Hornaday’s narrative of his Montana hunt attests to this resentment. He recalled in *The Cosmopolitan Magazine* that the largest bull he killed was shot late in the day and only partially prepared for his purposes. When he returned the next morning, he found that Piegan Indians, to whom he referred as “skulking thieves,” had “robbed” him of the skin and most of the edible meat. The Indians offered a poignant message—one Hornaday regarded as a personal affront. They had left the head unskinned and “on one side . . . had smeared the hair with red war-paint, the other they daubed with yellow, and around the base of one horn they had tied a strip of red flannel as a signal of defiance.”\textsuperscript{35} What seemed an insult was actually a ritualistic honoring of the animal.
Albert Bierstadt: Witness to a Changing West

In 2018, the Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming, is partnering with the Gilcrease Museum of Tulsa, Oklahoma, to produce a major exhibition focusing on Albert Bierstadt’s depictions of bison and the Plains Indians whom he approached as key subjects for his art. *Albert Bierstadt: Witness to a Changing West* features some seventy-two objects from more than thirty private and institutional lenders. Both the Center and the Gilcrease are contributing masterworks from their collections. In addition to signature paintings by Bierstadt, like *The Last of the Buffalo*, also included are works by artists of Bierstadt’s time and before depicting both American Indians and bison during a period of dramatic change in the West.

The exhibition is on view at the Center, June 8–September 30, 2018, and at the Gilcrease, November 1, 2018–February 10, 2019. It is accompanied by a peer-reviewed catalogue published by the University of Oklahoma Press. Both venues plan symposia on the subject. The Center’s Director Emeritus, Dr. Peter H. Hassrick, serves as exhibition curator. Co-curators are Karen B. McWhorter, Scarlett Curator of Western American Art at the Center, and Laura F. Fry, Senior Curator and Curator of Art at the Gilcrease.

and all the northern plains tribes had been incarcerated on reservations. Bierstadt also knew that the Crow, who had by earlier treaties retained most of what constituted Yellowstone, were excluded in the 1880s because they competed with recreational hunters.

*The Last of the Buffalo* paintings, whether or not set in the park, are very much about Yellowstone. By metaphorically reinserting the Indian into the park while also extolling the glory of the vast herds that once populated the West, Bierstadt symbolically reconnected the Plains Indians with the source of their spiritual, economic, and social fabric. *The Last
Bierstadt's two massive and nearly identical paintings titled *The Last of the Buffalo* were the zenith of the artist's career. Both paintings received acclaim in Europe, where the smaller version (above) sold in London for fifty thousand dollars in 1891—the highest price ever commanded for an American piece of art at that time. Today, one version is owned by the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming, while its near twin resides at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

World's Fair in Paris. The American jury in New York, however, rejected the painting on grounds that it was too large, not representative of current Parisian or Munich aesthetic trends, and supposedly did not characterize the artist's best effort—an action that caused a major controversy in art circles in the United States and abroad. Bierstadt, being a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, sent the work to France nonetheless, where it was displayed at the Paris Salon. The smaller version traveled to London two years later, where it sold at the Hanover Gallery, a commercial venue, for fifty thousand dollars. This was the largest price ever recorded for an American work of art in the nineteenth century. Again, the work attracted the attention of art audiences far and wide.

*The Last of the Buffalo* paintings, combined with
Bierstadt's legacy reaches beyond his glorious artistic celebrations of the historic West. Displayed publicly, works such as *The Last of the Buffalo* struck a sympathetic chord among viewers and resonated among his fellows in the Boone & Crockett Club. The club played a seminal role in the passage of the 1894 Lacey Act, the first legislation to provide effective legal protection for bison within Yellowstone National Park. Today, Yellowstone's herd—some four thousand animals—remains the only genetically pure, wild herd in the United States. Above is a stereograph of wild buffalo, one of America's "first families," at home on a sunny slope in Yellowstone Park.

alarming population counts in the late 1880s, brought into sharp focus the urgency of the situation. Recognizing that bison were facing imminent extinction, members of the Boone & Crockett Club continued to take steps to create public policies aimed at wildlife conservation. In 1894, club member and Ohio congressman John F. Lacey introduced a bill that would become the National Park Protection Act, popularly known as the Lacey Act, which was signed into law by President Grover Cleveland in May of that year. The act spelled the beginning of effective legal protections for the American bison. For the park, it was a defining moment. As historian Michael Punke wrote, "The year 1872 marked the birth of Yellowstone as a place, but 1894 marked the birth of Yellowstone as a commitment."40

Shedding this new light on Bierstadt as a conservationist may seem somewhat dissident. He has generally been regarded in modern times as a flamboyant social climber and opportunist, a whitewasher of history, a commodifier of Indians, an escapist fantasizer, a champion of Manifest Destiny, and a painter of gaudy, oversized landscape extravaganzas. There are a few art historians, however, who have proclaimed his significance as a history painter with his sincere attention to Indians, his outsized regard for wildlife as an appropriate subject for art, and his paintings as visual, spiritual, even moral, sanctuaries.41 As mythic pictorial narratives, *The Last of the Buffalo* captured a moment of "moral grandeur," as Bierstadt's traveling companion Fitz Hugh Ludlow had said of their initial encounter with the bison of Kansas in 1863.42 The paintings spoke in a magnificently eloquent and moving way to vital issues of the day in 1889 while glorifying the epic wonders of the early West that the artist had experienced in 1859, 1863, and 1881. Through his cultural convictions, his preservationist bent, and his artistic mastery and timely expressions, Bierstadt helped shape the course of American art in some positive ways that redefined, or at least adjusted, the complex meanings of nature's and the nation's rich frontier tapestry.

Dr. Peter H. Hassrick is director emeritus and senior scholar at Buffalo Bill Center of the West, Cody, Wyoming.