

Bierstadt and American Exceptionalism

My artist friend John is sending me various artists or movements or subject and style that I am using to picture in midJourney. For me I get the chance to experiment and to learn about each of these artists since I was finding that I was repeating a lot of prompts so needed some inspiration. In this case he wanted a “seascape by Albert Bierstadt” (1830-1902), Prussian born and part of the Hudson River and the Rocky Mountain schools of American art.

As I was reading up on him and the subject matter of his paintings, I thought of how this imagery contributed to westward expansion and the colonization of America. And as an historian, of course I thought of Fredrick Jackson Turner in his influential essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” which was first presented in 1893. Turner’s thesis argued that the American frontier experience had played a fundamental role in shaping American identity, culture, and democracy. This wasn’t good news for those displaced and forcibly removed from their ancestral lands, let alone the deaths that occurred at the hands of these colonists, but these visualizations were powerful motivators and contributed to the American sense of exceptionalism.

Depiction of the Frontier as a Source of American Identity:

Turner’s thesis proposed that the existence of the American frontier had a profound impact on the development of American characteristics, including individualism, self-reliance, and a sense of democracy.

Bierstadt’s paintings of the American West, with their vast, untamed landscapes and sense of limitless opportunity, visually reinforce Turner’s idea of the frontier as a defining aspect of American identity. Imagery like this pictured the West as an empty geography that promoted ideas such as Manifest Destiny, a perennial issue to us Canadians.

Bierstadt’s works often showcased the frontier as a land of grandeur and natural splendor. His paintings, such as “The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak,” conveyed the idea that the frontier was a place of both challenge and beauty, where Americans could test their mettle and forge a unique national identity. Light and luminance plays a key role in his work.

Romanticizing the Frontier:

Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the American frontier was not just a geographic place but also a state of mind, a crucible where American values and democracy were forged. Bierstadt's art embraced the Romanticism movement, which sought to evoke deep emotional connections with nature. By depicting the frontier with awe-inspiring landscapes, he contributed to the romanticization of the West, portraying it as a land of boundless promise and adventure.

Encouraging Westward Expansion:

Turner believed that the closing of the frontier, symbolized by the U.S. Census Bureau's declaration that the American West was no longer an unsettled frontier in 1890, marked the end of an era. Bierstadt's paintings, created during a time of westward expansion and exploration, played a role in inspiring people to head west in search of opportunities, contributing to the westward movement that Turner highlighted in his thesis.

Bierstadt's artworks conveyed the idea that the frontier was a place where dreams could be realized, encouraging settlement and exploration, which were central themes in Turner's thesis. His paintings portrayed the West as a vast, uncharted territory ripe for discovery (and exploitation).

Symbolizing the Closing of the Frontier:

Ironically, as Turner's thesis emphasized the closing of the American frontier, Bierstadt's later works, such as "The Last of the Buffalo," depicted the impact of westward expansion on the wilderness and native populations. These paintings highlighted the environmental and cultural changes that accompanied the closing of the frontier, aligning with Turner's concerns about the consequences of westward expansion.

Here are a few images that were created when ideating in midJourney with the keywords of Albert Bierstadt and "seascape"!





Source: <https://www.idonthaveacoolname.com/bierstadt-and-american-exceptionalism/>