

# Why yosemite represent the beauty of america

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Yosemite has become a symbol of America's natural beauty. Its grandeur draws in individuals who are attracted to the visions of wonder that it bestows. Visions so impactful that it provoked certain individuals to capture the greatness within an image; whether this be through painting or photography. These images served as both representations and documents of the landscape. With the introduction of photography on a commercial level in the 19th century, painting soon became the less popular form of image making. Reserved for those who had the technical skills and urge to do so. Photography became a more accessible medium, both in terms of the effort it took in creating an image and the ability as a viewer to establish a connection with an image. Ansel Adams, acclaimed photographer of Yosemite, produced photographs, like *Clearing Winter Storm*, that drew in millions of Americans to witness the natural grandeur for themselves. Whereas Albert Bierstadt, a pioneer painter, made works that stood as symbols and ultimately shaped what the park is today. Paintings such as, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley*, visualized the untouched environment in an idealized and romantic manner that is based on the artist's interpretation. As much as painting stands for the basis of photography, Albert Bierstadt's paintings of Yosemite serve as the precursor for Ansel Adams' photographs; these images allow for the creation of a symbol that goes further than the subject, elevating the natural beauties of Yosemite from place to cultural icon.

Albert Bierstadt's painting, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley*, is an idealized representation of the natural beauties of Yosemite, which quickly became a symbol for what the west had to offer with. Bierstadt has chosen to paint a

view into the valley as the sun sets behind a cliff. He has painted works from this view more than once. In 1864, a year before he painted Looking Down Yosemite Valley, he made Valley of the Yosemite an oil painting from a slightly different perspective and later made Sunset in the Yosemite Valley in 1868. All of these paintings were made from sketches done on Bierstadt's westward expedition where he traveled from New York to California along the Oregon Trail starting in 1843. This happens to be in the height of the Civil War, which filled the once beautiful landscapes of the East with bloodshed. Bierstadt's choice to paint the undeveloped wilderness of Yosemite presented the American people with a sign of hope and relief. As an 1865 San Francisco Bulletin states, "Until this picture was painted, the Eastern public had never enjoyed an opportunity to see any views of Yosemite except the small photographs and woodcuts which were so plentifully issued here." The painting shows no sign of human presence and presents us with Yosemite in all its greatness. Its natural grandeur captured the attention of the people, who had never before seen mountains so monumental. Bierstadt's paintings allowed the general public to visualize Yosemite in a certain way without actually visiting it, making it into an icon of westward expansion. "The romantic vision of Yosemite—timeless, simultaneously wild and pastoral, relatively unpeopled, suggestive of divine endorsement of American progress—became itself a historical force, shaping the valley's development as a park, tourist destination, artistic subject, and icon of American wilderness generally." <sup>3</sup> While Albert Bierstadt was one of the first artists to create images of Yosemite, he certainly wasn't the last.

Ansel Adams' photograph, *Clearing Winter Storm*, is one individual's view of Yosemite yet it has come to stand for one nation's image and symbol of this park. With its endless beauties, Yosemite attracted many photographers who made work responding directly to nature, making it a "case study for the evolution of the medium."<sup>3</sup> After Adams' first visit to the park he knew that this place would hold a special place in his life, "From that day in 1916 my life has been colored and modulated by the great earth gesture of the Sierra." The raw wilderness drew Adams in just like it did Bierstadt; and as Bierstadt felt the need to paint what he saw, Adams needed to photograph it. However, he faced the struggle of using photography as an expressive medium, which at the time was not widely accepted as fine art due to its "realistic" nature. By embracing this aspect in photography, he formed the Group f/64 along with West Coast photographers Edward Weston, Imogen Cunningham, and Willard Van Dyke.<sup>5</sup> The group advocated for this use of realistic photography as fine art and had a large influence on the world of photography. In addition to this group, Adams was an active member of the Sierra Club, an environmental organization concerned with preserving America's wilderness. Both these groups, and Yosemite itself, shaped Adams into the photographer he was.

The making of Yosemite into the symbol it is today required both artists to idealize the landscape, showing people America's wilderness in a very romantic way. Adams was able to achieve this through the formal qualities of his photographs. The hard-edged clarity, high contrast, and monumental aspect of his subject within *Clearing Winter Storm* make it an idealization of the American landscape. Similar to how Bierstadt perfected his landscape

from the sketches he did. James Jackson Jarves, an art critic, commented on Bierstadt's process, " With singular inconsistency of mind he idealizes in composition and materializes in execution, so that, though the details of the scenery are substantially correct, the scene as a whole is often false." 4

Making the grandeur of the west even grander. Bierstadt was fully aware of his duty in painting this western American landscape. With Adams and Bierstadt as singular artists, it brings in the question of the individual's place in nature. Through his photographs, we see Adams' vision of Yosemite and how he saw the natural world around him. As Adams describes it, " I work with the natural scene in both spectacular and tender modes. I think I have added personal qualities to my images which transcend—for better or worse—the impact of the external reality." 3 This ' external reality' is the crowds of people that populated the landscape, which soon became commonplace in the park.

The works of Adams and Bierstadt deal with man's relationship to nature on two different levels; both in society as a whole and with a more singular experience through the individual. The emphasis of these works is put on the experience of nature, and through their images these artists show that anyone can participate. It is in this way that their images express more than just what they saw. Adams believed in the concept that, " even if we never experience wilderness, we need to know it exists." 6 For Adams, the wilderness is " a mystique: a valid, intangible, non-materialistic experience." Through his photographs he is able to show the existence of nature and convey this mystique to the viewer. With this overwhelming number of images being produced it, " kept Yosemite in the public consciousness as a

symbol of American nature and a tourist destination par excellence for nearly 150 years.”<sup>3</sup> These images not only rejuvenated Yosemite in American culture, but also the awareness of our surrounding environment. With this attention came the flocks of tourists. The fact that his images show none of these people is another example of how Adams has idealized Yosemite in his photographs. Both Adams and Bierstadt conveyed “ a vision of an ideal America where nature’s grand scenes and gentle details live on in undiminished glory.”<sup>7</sup> This is what the tourists came to see. However, not only are the numbers of visitors of concern, so are the attitudes they bring with them. There was less “ contemplative appreciation”<sup>5</sup> going on and more vacationing. Turning Yosemite into another resource that could be exploited by businessmen, which “ helped transform Yosemite into something that could be possessed or consumed.”<sup>3</sup>

Through the power of visual imagery Ansel Adams and Albert Bierstadt have transformed Yosemite from a singular place to an everlasting icon of American wilderness. Photography has served a large role in documenting the natural world in a truthful manner; however, subjectivity serves its part when the photographer is choosing his scene. What Adams accomplished was informing America of the beauties of raw wilderness. His photographs, however, go beyond documenting these scenes. They become interpretive and emotional and are visualizations for the world Adams saw.<sup>3</sup> This same subjectivity comes into play with painting as Bierstadt was recreating his sketches. His paintings served in a different context of showing the American people what the West had to offer. Ultimately making Yosemite into what it represents today, reminding us of the importance of conserving nature.