



Picturing the American West



Albert Bierstadt (Germany, 1830- New York, 1902)

Mirror Lake, Yosemite Valley, 1864

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. Sterling Morton for the Preston Morton Collection

No one captured the romantic and awe inspiring spirit of the American West better than Albert Bierstadt. German by birth, he had been raised in New Bedford, Massachusetts and later studied in Europe, sketching castles on the Rhine and hiking in the Alps. He first saw the American West when he accompanied General Frederick Landers on a survey party westward from St. Louis. That trip, and subsequent similar excursions, inspired Bierstadt to paint gloriously romantic canvases, enormous in square footage to match their grand subject matter. At first enormously popular, by the time Bierstadt died in 1902, the year Owen Wooster's *The Virginian* was published, his canvases were assigned to the nation's attic and he had declared himself officially bankrupt. Years later his paintings once again inspire reverence for the Western landscape.

Something to Think About:

- Paintings like Bierstadt's help us to understand the 19th century American debate over natural resources. On the one hand, those who believed in Manifest Destiny saw nature as a vast bounty created by God for us to use as we please. The opposite view, that of the transcendentalists, held that nature is God made visible and to destroy it is a sacrilege. What is the modern equivalent of this argument? (Global warming/environmental debate) Which point of view do you think *Mirror Lake* justifies? Would you feel differently if you were living in 1864? Why or why not? What historical and cultural events might influence you?

Writing Activities:

- Bierstadt's painting helped convince Congress that areas like Yosemite should be protected as National Parks. Imagine that you are a member of Congress using this painting to convince your colleagues that Mirror Lake should be preserved. Write down your argument. Now shift sides and write down what your opponent might say to argue against you.
- Imagine Thoreau visited Yosemite. What might he write in his journal as he sits on the shores of Mirror Lake? If you like, illustrate the journal entry with a sketch of what he sees.
- Imagine that Congress voted against preserving Yosemite and that the National Park system doesn't exist. Write a paragraph or two describing what a visitor might see while staying at the Mirror Lake Motel.
- Imagine that you have magically entered Bierstadt's painting and are going for a walk along the shores of Mirror Lake. What do you see, hear, smell and feel? What might you see that is just outside the picture frame, beyond what we can see?

John McKinney award-winning nature writer, conservationist, and Los Angeles Times columnist, has long been active in the effort to save the state's environment. The following is taken from an essay called *Lost Coast*:

It is not really the coast that is lost but ourselves. If we cannot find the coast because of the smoke of our cities, the walls we build to keep one another out, the industries we run that run us, it is surely we who are lost.

We all need one place on the map, one place in our hearts that is lost. In a wild place, lost from the mean streets, we can find ourselves, our best selves. A place that is peaceful, for contemplation, is good; a place that is wild, for challenge and confrontation, is better; and a place that is both peaceful and wild, for the love of life and the lust of living, is best.

- Write 2 or 3 paragraphs using sensory detail describing a place special to you where you can both savor and contemplate life.