

THE DOMES OF THE YOSEMITE

O B J E C T G U I D E



THE DOMES OF THE YOSEMITE, 1867. Oil on canvas, Albert Bierstadt, German-American, 1830–1902. From the collection of the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum, St. Johnsbury, Vermont.

The Domes of the Yosemite, the largest existing painting by Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), is making its post-conservation debut at the Morse through a special loan from the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum in Vermont. The monumental 1867 painting, which has not been seen outside the Athenaeum since its installation there in 1873, appeared on the American scene in the context of the Hudson River School. These loosely affiliated landscape artists produced grand, romantic images of New York's countryside. Bierstadt took this Hudson River model to the

American West, producing western landscapes of the same scale and spirit. In this genre, no artist's work was more luminous, theatrical, or better loved.

About the Artist

Born in Germany, Bierstadt came to the United States at the age of two. He grew up in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and became a drawing instructor before returning to Germany in 1853 for formal art training. In 1859, Bierstadt joined Frederick W. Lander's survey expedition into the Rocky

Mountains. His artistic response to the West's raw and rugged beauty changed the course of his career. On his second journey in 1863, he visited California's Yosemite Valley. Traveling by stagecoach and horseback, he made sketches and photographs.

These inspired the large-scale canvases he constructed in the Tenth Street Studio Building in New York City and at his home in Irvington, New York. Bierstadt's work introduced many Americans to the wild, soaring vistas of the western territories.



ALBERT BIERSTADT,
c. 1875–80. *Albumen
silver print, Sarony &
Co., New York City.*
*Digital image
courtesy of the Getty's
Open Content Program.*

The Domes Commission

At the height of Bierstadt's popularity, American financier LeGrand Lockwood (1820–72) commissioned *The Domes* for his new home in Norwalk, Connecticut. He paid \$25,000. The painting is a panoramic view of the valley—including Yosemite Falls, the North Dome, and the Half Dome—from near Columbia Rock. As a painting, it is alluring and technically masterful—a three-dimensional illusion into which the viewer tumbles and falls amid a symphony of color and light. As a vision, it is sublime, epic in scale, forged of high drama and deep emotion. To stand in front of Bierstadt's *Domes* is to witness the numinous. What nature created with soil, rock, trees, clouds, and stars, Bierstadt created with pigment and imagination. Bierstadt's

domes rivaled, if not surpassed, the real ones.

After Lockwood's death, the painting was auctioned for \$5,100 and shortly purchased for the same price by Horace Fairbanks (1820–88) of E. & T. Fairbanks & Company, a successful manufacturer of industrial scales, in St. Johnsbury. As a gift to his community, Fairbanks founded the St. Johnsbury Athenaeum in 1871, financed its building, and provided for its library and art collection. In 1873, he added the art gallery to accommodate *The Domes*, and it has been the pride of the collection ever since.

The Winter Park, Florida, Connection

Charles Hosmer Morse (1833–1921), the industrialist and philanthropist for whom the Morse Museum is named, is a native of St. Johnsbury. Morse joined Fairbanks & Company in 1850, ultimately becoming the controlling partner in Fairbanks, Morse & Co. headquartered in Chicago. The Elizabeth Morse Genius Foundation in Winter Park made a substantial contribution to the Athenaeum's *Domes* Project, which included the painting's conservation. In restoring the painting to its former glory, ArtCare Conservation Studio in Miami repaired tears around the perimeter, flattened distortions, and removed surface grime and old varnish.



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