

Albert Bierstadt (Solingen, Germany, 1830–New York City, 1902)

Mount Corcoran, c. 1876–77

Oil on canvas, 60³/₁₆ × 95⁷/₁₆ in. (154.2 × 243.4 cm)

Signed lower right: ABierstadt. (A and B in monogram)

Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund, 78.1

Albert Bierstadt first submitted *Mount Corcoran* to the 1877 annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design with the generic title *Mountain Lake*.¹ There the painting met with a hostile reception. Critics saw the canvas as empty, meaningless, and “a mistake” and complained that it was hung in one of the best locations at the expense of better works.² The near-unanimous negative verdict was something new for Bierstadt. Early in his career, his dramatic subject matter and careful attention to detail and textures, evident in *Mount Corcoran*’s simultaneously transparent and reflective water, were objects of praise. His style showed the effects of early training in Düsseldorf, Germany. Although he did not attend the Düsseldorf Academy, Bierstadt quickly mastered the school’s trademark detailed naturalism and smooth surfaces by studying the work of his fellow students Worthington Whittredge and Emanuel Leutze.³ After returning to the United States, the ambitious Bierstadt tried to find a niche that would distinguish his work from that of other American landscapists. He found it on a trip to the Rocky Mountains in 1859 with the survey team of Colonel Frederick West Lander. Bierstadt established himself as the premier painter of the American West and the first artist to devote large-scale oils exclusively to western landscape. Showpiece canvases such as *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak* (1863, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), which he sold for the sensational amount of twenty-five thousand dollars, and *Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mount Rosalie* (1866, Brooklyn Museum) were so popular that visitors were willing to wait on line or pay admission to see them.⁴ But by the time he began work on *Mount Corcoran*, public taste had shifted to smaller, more intimate works, and Bierstadt’s notorious self-promotion had begun to alienate the art establishment.⁵

Stung by the critics’ disapproval of *Mountain Lake* but undaunted in his pursuit of recognition, Bierstadt determined to have his work acquired by a major American museum and set his sights on the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Bierstadt’s biographers have illuminated how the artist succeeded in placing his painting at the Corcoran, but recent research has added new details to the story.⁶ After the academy exhibition closed, Bierstadt rechristened the painting *Mount Corcoran*, took it to Washington, D.C., and asked William T. Walters, who sat on the Corcoran’s board of trustees, to look at it. When Walters refused, Bierstadt sent the painting to Samuel Ward, a prominent Washington lobbyist and Corcoran’s longtime friend, who had it installed in Corcoran’s home while the banker was away.⁷ Corcoran had the painting sent to the gallery, where it hung for six months while he mulled over its purchase. In January 1878, after twice threatening to remove the painting and exhibit and sell it elsewhere, Bierstadt visited Corcoran and convinced him to purchase the work for seven thousand dollars.⁸

From that point, documents offer conflicting accounts of how the sale proceeded. Gallery curator William MacLeod recorded in his journal:

Letter from Mr. Bierstadt, intimating that the Mt. Corcoran was bought by Mr. Corcoran & expressing his delight that it was to remain here. Showed it to Mr. Corcoran, with a

copy of my last letter to Mr B. and Mr. C. then stated that he had bought the picture for \$7,000 for his own house, but as Bierstadt wrote as if he expected it to be placed in the Gallery, he would let it remain there.⁹

Rather than purchasing the painting himself and giving it to the gallery, it appears that Corcoran arranged for the gallery to pay at least half the purchase price.¹⁰ Revealing his own confusion, MacLeod wrote that the board had allocated seven thousand dollars “to pay Mr. Bierstadt for his landscape bought ~~for~~ by William Wilson Corcoran.”¹¹ In later reminiscences, MacLeod noted that the painting’s name and purchase invited “much spiteful comment.”¹² Either to deflect criticism of Corcoran for overriding the board, which did not support its purchase (a New York newspaper claimed Walters resigned from the board of trustees over the matter), or to place blame for the painting’s acquisition where it most rightly fell, MacLeod continued to assert that the painting had been purchased by Corcoran himself.¹³

MacLeod’s reservations about *Mount Corcoran* were not confined to the circumstances of the purchase. Although Linda Ferber has pointed out that no one seems to have noticed that *Mount Corcoran* and *Mountain Lake* are one and the same painting (the National Academy of Design’s catalogue includes an illustration of *Mountain Lake*),¹⁴ questions were immediately raised about whether *Mount Corcoran* was a real mountain or Bierstadt’s invention. MacLeod expressed relief when Bierstadt brought him a map from the War Department that indicated the location of *Mount Corcoran*, but the next day he wrote in exasperation, “It seems after all that Mt. Corcoran was not engraved on the War Dept. map, but written there by one of the officials at Mr. Bierstadt’s request! That seems a sharp practice by the artist.”¹⁵ MacLeod also took issue with the quality of Bierstadt’s rendering, asking the artist to rework an area of the clouds after the painting first arrived at the Corcoran and again a year later.¹⁶

The suspicion aroused by Bierstadt’s choice of title for *Mount Corcoran* has obscured the fact that the artist did, in fact, name a specific peak he had visited in the Sierra Nevada in 1872 after Corcoran, albeit after he had worked up *Mountain Lake* and decided to pursue the banker as a patron.¹⁷ The peak he designated *Mount Corcoran* came to be known locally as *Mount Langley* and was officially named such in 1943.¹⁸ Bierstadt’s efforts to establish a real *Mount Corcoran* in the Sierra Nevada and MacLeod’s efforts to confirm the fact, however, appear to have been of little importance to the collector, who later referred to the painting as a “Rocky Mountain scene.”¹⁹

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