

YOSEMITE: EXPLORING THE INCOMPARABLE VALLEY

*Exhibition Brings Art and Science together in Commemoration of the 150th Anniversary of the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History and the Centennial of America's National Park Service
October 7–December 31, 2016*

October 7, 2016, New Haven, Conn.—
Commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History and the 100th anniversary of the creation of America's National Park Service, *Yosemite: Exploring the Incomparable Valley* considers one of the country's most celebrated natural landmarks through the fields of both art and science. Taking as its starting point Albert Bierstadt's majestic *Yosemite Valley, Glacier Point Trail* (ca. 1873), the exhi-



Albert Bierstadt, *Yosemite Valley, Glacier Point Trail*, ca. 1873. Oil on canvas, 54 × 84¼ in. (137.2 × 215.3 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of Mrs. Vincenzo Ardenghi

bition features works of art from the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery alongside natural history specimens—primarily botanical and geological—collected by scientists for the Yale Peabody Museum, as well as photographs, watercolors, and books from the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library and Sterling Memorial Library that have helped shape understanding and appreciation of Yosemite.

Landscape painting was established as the first American art movement in 1825, nearly half a century before Bierstadt painted *Yosemite Valley*. Over time, landscape artists traveled farther and farther west to portray the expansion of the nation, discovering new wonders and inspiration for their art. Beginning in 1855, small bands of artists, scientists, and tourists traveled to Yosemite to explore the valley. The enormity of the western landscape, still inaccessible to most easterners, beggared written description and encouraged artists like Bierstadt to embrace a large scale for their paintings, immersing viewers in their scenes. Bierstadt first visited Yosemite in 1863 and became one of its early champions in art. By his next visit, in 1872, the completion of the transcontinental railroad had expanded access to the area to a broader segment of the American public—one that had been introduced to Yosemite by art and wanted to experience its landmarks in person.

President Abraham Lincoln extended the first protection to the region in 1864, in the depths of the Civil War, recognizing the valley and the ancient sequoias of nearby Mariposa Grove for



Carleton E. Watkins, *Yosemite Falls*, 2,634 ft., ca. 1865–66. Albumen print, 12 × 8¹/₁₆ in. (30.5 × 20.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of George Hopper Fitch, B.A. 1932

their unsurpassed scale, unique character, and awe-inspiring beauty. Artists and scientists alike admired Yosemite’s majesty; further study during the ensuing decades would only enhance the appreciation of its power and its wealth of natural phenomena. Conflicting theories about the forces that had shaped the valley were debated by influential naturalists like John Muir, who would famously dub Yosemite “the incomparable valley.” The region seized and held the attention of the public, as it continues to do today, sustaining a widely shared commitment to its preservation.

Organized around Bierstadt’s *Yosemite Valley*, this exhibition explores the painting’s artistic and natural contexts. Romanticized—and at times imaginary—representations of Yosemite by the first generation of artists to portray the region reveal the importance of Bierstadt’s detailed realism, which was so thorough that viewers were encouraged to examine his paintings through opera glasses. Although the paintings were at times criticized for such excessive detail, Bierstadt adopted a degree of realism that was compared to scientific study. With his art, he sought to understand the landscape and help his viewers do the same.

In addition to marveling at the details of Bierstadt’s painting, visitors can touch a piece of granite from the El Capitan rock formation, see an early, three-dimensional view from Glacier Point Trail through a stereo viewer, and contemplate the photographs that convinced Abraham Lincoln to sign the Yosemite Grant Act in 1864. A redwood specimen on loan from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies further allows visitors to experience the scale of Yosemite’s natural grandeur firsthand. “The wide range of materials in Yale’s collections pertaining to Yosemite has been a revelation in itself,” observes Mark D. Mitchell, the Holcombe T. Green Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture and curator of the exhibition, adding that “it reflects the many fields of human understanding advanced by the long and varied study of this remarkable corner of our world.”

Pamela Franks, Acting Director of the Gallery and Deputy Director for Exhibitions, Programming, and Education, remarks, “The concurrence of the Yale Peabody Museum and the National Parks Service anniversaries inspired this wonderful presentation, drawing Yale collections together in a novel and compelling way. Bierstadt’s glorious *Yosemite Valley* is a treasure of the Gallery’s collection that will now be seen with fresh eyes, both in the context of its historical moment and its relationship to the work of other artists and scientists studying and interpreting the valley in subsequent generations.”



Fred Payne Clatworthy, *John Burroughs and John Muir, Yosemite*, May 1909, 1909. Gelatin silver print, 8¹/₁₆ × 13¹/₁₆ in. (20.6 × 33.5 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Fund

On View

October 7-December 31, 2016

Related Programs

Conversation

Thursday, October 6, 5:30 pm

“Yale at Yosemite: A Conversation across University Collections”

Mark D. Mitchell, the Holcombe T. Green Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture, Yale University Art Gallery, and David K. Skelly, Director of the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History and the Frank R. Oastler Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies

Followed by a reception. Generously sponsored by the Martin A. Ryerson Fund

Exhibition Tours

Tuesdays, October 25 and November 29, 12:30 pm

Gallery Talks

Wednesday, November 2, 12:30 pm

“The Art of Record: Photographic Vision in Yosemite”

Mark D. Mitchell, the Holcombe T. Green Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture, Yale University Art Gallery

Wednesday, December 7, 12:30 pm

“Rephotographing the American West”

Judy Ditner, Acting Head and the Richard Benson Assistant Curator of Photography and Digital Media, Yale University Art Gallery

All programs are free and open to the public unless otherwise noted. For more detailed programming information, visit artgallery.yale.edu/calendar.

Exhibition Credits

Exhibition organized by Mark D. Mitchell, the Holcombe T. Green Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture. Made possible by the Art Gallery Exhibition and Publication Fund and the Friends of American Arts at Yale Exhibition Fund.

Yale University Art Gallery

The Yale University Art Gallery, the oldest college art museum in the United States, was founded in 1832 when the patriot-artist John Trumbull gave more than 100 of his paintings to Yale College. Since then its collections have grown to more than 200,000 objects ranging in date from ancient times to the present.

General Information

The Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel Street, New Haven, Connecticut. Museum hours: Tuesday-Friday, 10 am-5 pm; Thursday until 8 pm (September-June); and Saturday-Sunday, 11 am-5 pm. The Gallery is closed Mondays and major holidays. Free and open to the public. For general information, please call 203.432.0600 or visit the website at artgallery.yale.edu.

Press Contact

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