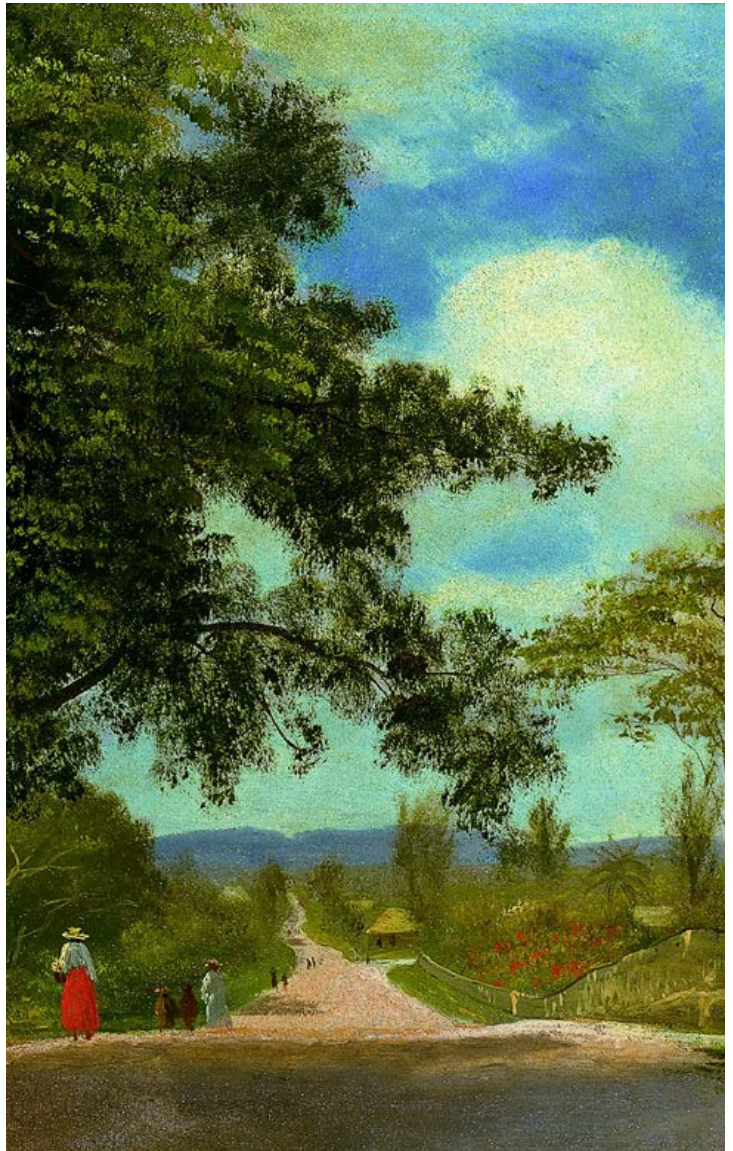


# Bierstadt's view of a street in Nassau: a painting about becoming

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Alba Campo Rosillo



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Albert Bierstadt  
*Street in Nassau*, c. 1877–80  
(detail)  
[\[+ info\]](#)



fig. 1

**Albert Bierstadt**  
**Street in Nassau, c. 1877–80**  
 Oil on board pasted onto canvas,  
 35.5 × 48.3 cm  
 Colección Carmen Thyssen,  
 CTB.1996.19

## 1

Special thanks to Anne S. Cross and Jill Vaum Rothschild for their suggestions and comments to improve this article.

Albert Bierstadt was particularly adept at capturing the atmosphere of his time in powerful works that clearly fascinated Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza.<sup>1</sup> Born in Germany in 1830, the artist grew up in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in the United States before moving back to Germany to undertake formal studies in Düsseldorf between 1853 and 1857. After finishing his German training, Bierstadt returned to America, where he specialised in the creation of sensational landscapes of the country's West. Like the painter, the baron had German ancestors and a distinct taste for romantic landscape painting. On the occasion of the centenary of the baron's birth, the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza conducted a research project to look into the history of his American art collection, with interesting finds. For instance, it uncovered that between 1980 and 1996, the baron – first singly, and then together with his last wife Carmen Cervera – purchased seven pieces by Bierstadt, assembling a representative sample of his production. The paintings range from 1863 to 1900 and allow for an examination of this artist's style and preferred themes.

Unlike his large-scale paintings of America's natural wonders, one small picture in particular, *Street in Nassau* [fig. 1], signals a shift in Bierstadt's mature body of work. In 1877 the artist visited Nassau for the first time. He travelled to the Bahamas in the company of his wife Rosalie, who had been diagnosed as consumptive and advised to seek a temperate climate to alleviate her pulmonary problems in winter. During his stay on the island, Bierstadt started making sketches that introduce a new facet of his work: instead of the grand landscapes celebrating unspoiled nature with a harmonious palette for which he was renowned, he turned to the depiction of everyday scenes using accents of colour. By the time Bierstadt began this new line of work, his reputation had dwindled and the paintings for which he had been acclaimed had fallen into critical disfavour. What follows argues that his experience on the island brought about this change in subject matter and perspective, as reflected in *Street in Nassau*. I will examine Bierstadt's understudied production in the Bahamas in the context of his larger oeuvre. In so doing, I will explore the local cultural diversity and complex politics of the period that compelled the artist to create such exceptional and reflective paintings around issues of colour, race and national identity.

### **Bierstadt's body of work**

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*Street in Nassau* presents a rural road along a walled property and a spattering of cabins in the background. In the foreground at left, two people rest on a bench while a man and a woman on foot interact under the shade of a tree. The two large, leafy trees at left originate inside the walled property, which has a pillared entry with pyramid-shaped capitals next to which a boy or man in a hat stands. It is daytime and the azure blue sky shows through patches of clouds. Slightly off-centre in the middle ground, a woman in a white blouse and bright red skirt holding a basket loaded with goods walks away. Her placement in the composition and the vibrancy of the colour in which she is rendered turn her into the focal point of the painting. Ahead of her, small groups of people walk down the road toward the distance. Trees frame both





fig. 2  
**Albert Bierstadt**  
***Mountain Scene, 1865-70***  
 Private collection

sides of the composition, those on the right less dense than the ones on the left. Further away the road leads to a group of one-story houses and up to the mountains. The constructions are Afro-Bahamian huts with roofs made from thatch that contrast with the mansion which can be intuited from the stone wall at left.

*Street in Nassau* is an exception within the baron's collection of Bierstadt's oeuvre. Contrary to its small scale and mundane subject, the other six works that belonged at some point to Baron Thyssen are all large scenes of wide valleys with special light effects. They represent the sublime, where the landscape elements appear in large scale and full force, underscoring the power of nature on human beings.<sup>2</sup> *Sunset at Yosemite* immerses the viewer in a glowing bath of light with towering mountains whose colour extends to the sky and lake. The eye finds respite from the warm hues in the green foreground – where a field of grass and trees frame the composition on both sides – and the small figures of cattle standing in the lake. Similar in composition but different in lighting is *Mountain Scene* [fig. 2]. Monumental compositions and broad spaces constitute the defining traits of Bierstadt's sublime work, in which, notwithstanding, fine detail receives the same attention as the overall setting, inviting both scrutiny and absorption.

## 2

For more on the sublime and visual examples of these works, see Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, Sophie Lynford, Jennifer Raab and Nicholas Robbins, *Picturesque and Sublime: Thomas Cole's Trans-Atlantic Inheritance*, Catskill, New York, Thomas Cole National Historic Site, 2018, 123–33.



fig. 3  
**Albert Bierstadt**  
*Sacramento River Valley*, 1872-73  
 Oil on canvas, 81.5 × 122.5 cm  
 Private collection

fig. 4  
**Albert Bierstadt**  
*The Golden Gate*, 1900  
 Oil on canvas, 96.5 × 152.5 cm  
 Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection

Further comparison of Bierstadt's work reinforces the idea that there was an underlying repetitive compositional formula surrounding the sublime. In another pair of paintings from the original Thyssen Collection, *Evening on the Prairie* and *Sacramento River Valley* [fig. 3], the figure of a man or a tree mark the low foreground, while the warm evening sunlight illuminates the background and cloudy sky. The sublime resonates in the enveloping light that suggests the presence of the divine. Later Bierstadt purchases in the baron's holdings include large scenes of tumultuous waters, either falling down the face of a cliff – as in *The Falls of St. Anthony* – or crashing on a shore [fig. 4]. Rocky bodies contain the water in both paintings, showing the inhospitable character of nature and its power to damage and kill.

*Street in Nassau*, however, participates in the aesthetic of the 'picturesque', which delights in the representation of a beauty different from the sublime. The picturesque, a category conceptualised in the 18th century, shaped remote regions of wild nature and gentle characteristics to provide the onlooker with feelings of calm and rest.<sup>3</sup> *Street in Nassau* did just that – it captured the daily activity of a rural road in the exotic Bahamas. The scale is human, not majestic; the light natural, not divine; the colour spread out, not applied in blocks. The harmonious palette and lack of dramatic elements soothe the eye and the mind.

**3**

For more on the picturesque and visual examples of these works, see Barringer, Forrester, Lynford, Raab and Robbins, *Picturesque and Sublime*, n. 2, 98–119.

**4**

James Henry Stark, *Stark's History and Guide to the Bahama Islands*, Boston, Photo-electrotype Company, 1891, 107.

**5**

Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2006, 126–27.

**6**

Dana E. Byrd, 'Trouble in Paradise? Winslow Homer in the Bahamas, Cuba, and Florida, 1884–1886', in *Winslow Homer and the Camera: Photography and the Art of Painting*, Brunswick, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2018, 102–40, here 114.

**7**

The Royal Victoria Hotel opened in 1861 and was the first luxury venue of this type in Nassau.

**8**

Rosalie Bierstadt, 'Dreamy Susan: Part I', *Far and Near* 20 (June 1892), 160–61.

## Street in Nassau

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The city of Nassau was the capital of the Caribbean island of New Providence, which functioned as the seat of government for more than 700 islands in the Bahamas archipelago. First colonised by the British in 1718 (and independent since 1973), in 1891 New Providence had 14,000 inhabitants, of which one fifth was white and the rest were Black or of mixed ancestry.<sup>4</sup> The white elite consisted of British colonial administrators and merchants. Non-white Bahamians suffered from political and geographical segregation in housing, education, work and social intercourse.<sup>5</sup> This discrimination was particularly evident in the tourist resorts that sprouted all over the island, which could not be accessed by Black subjects unless they were there to serve the white guests.<sup>6</sup> In her 1892 short story, 'Dreamy Susan', Rosalie Bierstadt describes her 'colored' housemaid at the Royal Victoria Hotel, for whom this job was her first experience in 'waiting on de quality folks', as Rosalie quotes Susan saying.<sup>7</sup> In the writer's opinion, the maid had, 'like all the Nassau colored people of her class, who are the politest [she had] ever met, the habit of assenting to nearly everything said to her'.<sup>8</sup> It would be difficult to find a clearer example of the racial politics on the island at the end of the century, where Black Bahamians served the white population in a colonial culture of segregation and repression where subjugation was made to look like politeness.

Tourism developed in response to the island's limitations for agricultural production. The soil of white limestone of New Providence was unfit for a plantation economy. Indeed, Krista Thompson identifies Nassau's 'antitropical landscape' – one lacking in plantations of commercial scale as on other islands – as the reason why the island became a destination for travellers.<sup>9</sup> The white elite soon began catering to the winter tourists who arrived at its shores, looking to enjoy its gentle climate, wild vegetation and, to their minds, exotic Black population. Already in 1856, *The Illustrated London News* talked of the 'warm-hearted hospitality' to be found in the 'clean, neat, quiet town of Nassau', where stacks of conch shells and huge sponges were ubiquitous and 'it seems to snow-cotton'.<sup>10</sup> Rosalie Bierstadt put it this way: there was 'no climate to equal that of the Bahamas – no breezes at once so balmy and so bracing – no skies so blue'.<sup>11</sup> This was a dream paradise for white residents, ordered and calm, with plenty of resources to enable foreigners to enjoy an easy life.

Following Bierstadt's first visit in 1877, the artist stayed on Nassau Island three more times, accompanying his wife until she passed away in 1893. A dozen or so Bahamian pieces from that time, including sketches and paintings, have survived, shedding light on Bierstadt's Caribbean production. This body of work includes three large paintings that attest to Bierstadt's life-long taste for the sublime: they present a beach with a dramatic wave breaking on the shore that threatens to engulf the viewer [figs. 5, 6]. In the 1878 version, the remains of a shipwreck pierce the menacing wave, addressing one of the most popular topics of sublime landscape painting. Bierstadt's Bahamian works also include small sketches, originally painted on paper and later pasted onto another support. These sketches show coastal landscapes too, but contrary to the breaking waves that play a central role in his oil paintings, they feature serene scenes in compositions that combine the horizontal with the vertical axis, often introducing a subtle diagonal line that does not disturb the overall feeling of calm.

9

Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*, n. 5, 96–97.

10

'The Market in Nassau, New Providence', *The Illustrated London News*, 5 January 1856, <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00010577/00001>.

11

Rosalie Bierstadt, 'Dreamy Susan: Part 2', *Far and Near* 21 (July 1892), 182.



fig. 5  
Albert Bierstadt  
*Beach at Nassau, n.d.*  
Oil on canvas, 28.6 × 47 cm  
Private collection



fig. 6  
Albert Bierstadt  
*The Shore of the Turquoise Sea, 1878*  
Oil on canvas 108 × 163.8 cm  
Manoogian Collection, Detroit







fig. 7  
**Albert Bierstadt**  
*Nassau Harbor*, c. 1877  
 Oil on paper mounted on paperboard,  
 37.5 × 50.8 cm  
 De Young Fine Arts Museums  
 of San Francisco, Museum purchase,  
 Mildred Anna Williams Collection,  
 1961.22

In *Nassau Harbor* [fig. 7], the horizontal prevails, as do the colours blue and orange, sprinkled with white patches that shape a sail, a shirt, a cloud. The white accents draw the eye toward the picturesque scenery pervaded with everyday life. Unlike these sketches, *Street in Nassau* was made in oil on board, probably because Bierstadt needed a hard support on which to paint *en-plein-air*, and then pasted onto canvas for exhibition. The painting participates in the experimental quality of his sketches in its materiality and fresh approach, yet it deviates from both the sketches and the oil paintings in that the composition has much more movement and rhythm than these other pieces, a cadence that is accentuated by the application of colour.

## Failures or opportunities

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Bierstadt's good instinct for business opportunities cemented his fame as an ambitious man.<sup>12</sup> Although he came from humble origins, the artist made a fortune in the 1860s from his investments in photography, land and mining speculation, engineering inventions and public relations. Above all, he profiled himself as the painter *par excellence* of American Western landscapes. Especially clever were the commercial tours he organised to display his painted panoramas, staged in cinematic fashion across the United States. These events enabled him to collect an entrance fee from visitors and the benefits from the sale of prints and pamphlets, and helped his popularity rise. Bierstadt reached the pinnacle of his career in 1865, when several British railroad entrepreneurs commissioned him to paint landscapes of the areas they were developing. The artist celebrated his success that year by purchasing land at Irvington-on-Hudson to build a lavish mansion.<sup>13</sup> Bierstadt was on fire.

However, his success was not to last. The 1860s saw mounting criticism of his oeuvre. In the first art historical biography of US artists published in 1867, Henry T. Tuckerman criticised Bierstadt's work as follows: 'Bierstadt is a true representative of the Dusseldorf school in landscape [...]; they are often excellent draughtsmen, expert, like all artistic Germans, in form and composition, but in color frequently hard and dry; they abound in the intellectual, and are wanting in the sensuous [...]. Skill prevails over imagination in the Dusseldorf artists; [...] as a class, these painters are inclined to the sensational; [...] they are more *effective* than *impressive*; more clever than tender; yet, withal, admirably equipped for their work, though often uninspired by it'.<sup>14</sup> Even earlier, in 1864, James Jackson Jarves had deplored the loud theatricality of Bierstadt's paintings, and in 1869 he disqualified them outright in the following terms: '[the paintings] are bold and effective speculations in art on principles of trade; emotionless and soulless'.<sup>15</sup>

### 12

'Council Minutes', 14 May 1902, NAD Archives, referenced in Linda S. Ferber, 'The History of a Reputation', in Nancy K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, with a contribution by Helena E. Wright, New York, Hudson Hills Press in association with the Brooklyn Museum, 1990, 22.

### 13

Linda S. Ferber, 'The History of a Reputation', n. 12, 21–68.

### 14

Henry T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists: American Artist Life, comprising biographical and critical sketches of American artists: preceded by an historical account of the rise and progress of art in America*, New York, G. P. Putnam & Son, 1867, 392.

### 15

James Jackson Jarves, *The Art-Idea*, 3 vols, New York, Hurd and Houghton, 1877 [1864], 233; and James Jackson Jarves, *Art Thoughts*, New York, Hurd & Houghton, 1869, 299.

'Hard', 'dry' and 'uninspired' maybe, but 'sensational' and theatrically loud – of course, that was the whole point! Bierstadt's paintings were large and, despite Tuckerman's opinion, impressive, and he exhibited them using special light effects and curtains to provoke a reaction in the viewer. They wanted to be sensational – they chased sensation. However, these painted sensations lost favour in the late 1860s and 1870s, when Bierstadt stopped receiving awards at the Paris Art Salons. Lois Marie Fink reflects that 'nature's grandeur, as the source of images that stimulated the eye or emotions of viewers, had become passé, and Bierstadt's scenic wonders, with their definitive sense of completion, further alienated a public that increasingly rejected passive viewing experiences in favor of paintings that encouraged their own involvement'.<sup>16</sup> I argue that it was to align himself with this new way of engaging the viewer that Bierstadt changed his approach to painting in his Nassau works, trying to look for formulas to captivate again the audience.

### Novel colour approaches

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*Street in Nassau* was Bierstadt's most daring attempt at trying to establish a new relationship with the viewer. Instead of the colour fields or blocks with which he usually worked, his picturesque Bahamian paintings – *Street in Nassau* in particular – sprinkled colour here and there. With this, the artist deliberately created a rhythmic code designed to engage viewers and encourage them to sweep their gaze across the painting. In *Street in Nassau*, the red spot in the form of the hatted woman at centre catches the eye with magnetic force, sending it to the right through the connecting arched branches of the trees, echoed by the undulating shapes of the clouds. The tree branches converge to highlight the red flowers amid the green grass. The elliptically shaped elongated shade on the foreground moves the eye, this time to the left, where it ascends through the lit pillared entry, up the tree trunk and back to the woman through the tree branches. The use of colour is crucial to set the eye in motion, to steer it to meander around the figures and make sense of the composition.

<sup>16</sup>

Lois Marie Fink, *American Art at the Nineteenth-Century Paris Salons*, Washington, D.C., National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution; Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 229–30.

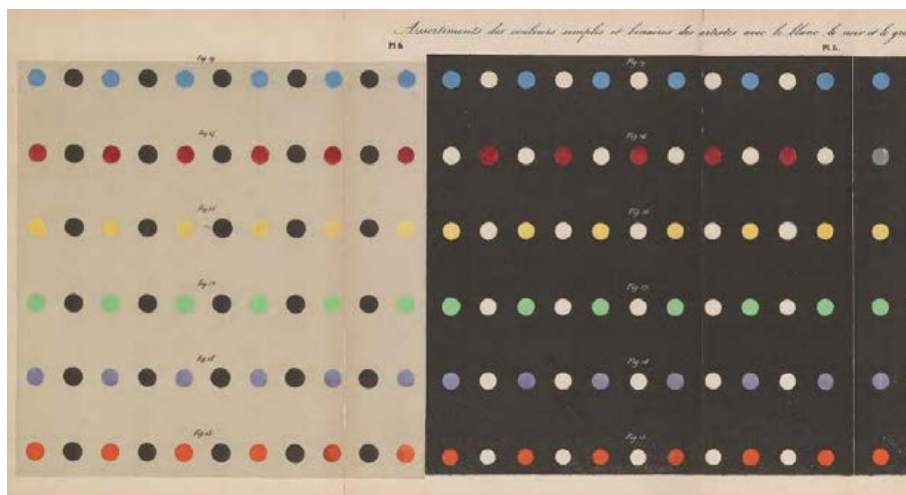


fig. 8

**Michel Eugène Chevreul**  
*De la loi du contraste simultané  
des couleurs, et de l'assortiment des  
objets colorés, considéré d'après  
cette loi, Paris, Pitois-Levrault, 1839*

The chromatic scheme which Bierstadt applied to *Street in Nassau* derived from the scientific discoveries of Michel Eugène Chevreul, the French chemist who was director of dyeing at the Manufactures Royales des Gobelins. In this post he endeavoured to solve the mystery as to why tapestries looked chromatically dull. Chevreul was asked to study the formula of the dyes, but he realised that the problem was not chemical but optical, what mattered was not the formula but the way colours interacted with each other when juxtaposed. The chemist established the law of simultaneous contrast after careful empirical observation to determine that the eye perceives colours differently when they are placed side by side. Based on these observations, Chevreul published in 1839 a treatise with colour combinations of primary and secondary shades that artists and designers would mine for decades.<sup>17</sup>

In *Street in Nassau*, Bierstadt clearly followed Chevreul's teachings to improve his critical reputation. The colour combinations of Chevreul's plates 5 and 6 [fig. 8] are clearly in evidence in *Street in Nassau*, where light blue combines with white in the sky; green and purple with pale blue on the horizon line; orange, yellow and white with purple tones on the ground; and repetitions of these combinations on the left wall. The most striking colour scheme is that featuring the woman in a red skirt and white blouse surrounded by green and very close to a large extension of blue.

17

Michel Eugène Chevreul, *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs, et de l'assortiment des objets colorés, considéré d'après cette loi*, Paris, Pitois-Levrault, 1839. The treatise was soon translated into English and its popularity spread across the continents. It is well documented that Winslow Homer owned a translated copy in which he made extensive notes on colour effects.



fig. 9 ↓

**Winslow Homer**  
*Waverly Oaks*, 1864  
Oil on paper mounted on panel,  
33.6 × 25.4 cm  
Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,  
Madrid, 589 (1980.87)



fig. 10 ↑

**William Merritt Chase**  
*In the Park. A By-path*, c. 1889  
Oil on paper mounted on panel,  
33.6 × 25.4 cm  
Colección Carmen Thyssen,  
CTB.1979.15

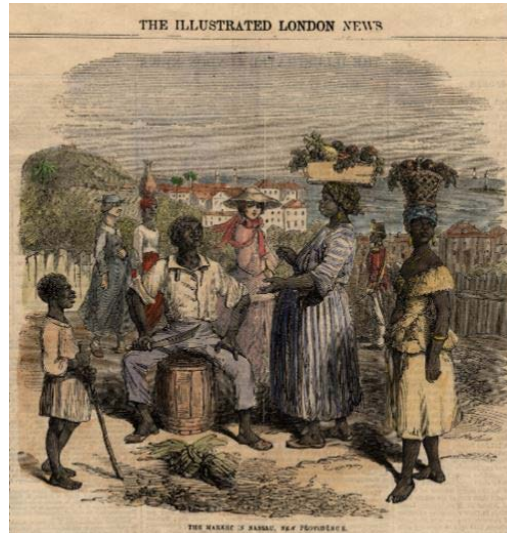
We also see these effective colour combinations in other paintings in the collection, as in the works by US American artist Winslow Homer, who owned an English translation of Chevreul's treatise. Homer used Chevreul's palette from early on, as in *Waverly Oaks* [fig. 9]. Here, the figure in a red cape is surrounded by green foliage, and there is light blue crowning the view in the sky peeking through the branches.<sup>18</sup> Another exquisite example of such colour combinations appears in a much later work by another US American artist, William Merritt Chase, in *In the Park. A By-path* [fig. 10], where the woman sitting at the centre of the painting wears a red skirt and hat in a rich green environment, and the grey path introduces the blue and purple tones. These are only two of the many instances of use of Chevreul's handbook in the work of the artists represented at the museum, where their chromatic experiments evince a taste for dispersed tonalities combining complementary colours.

18

John Spanton, *Chevreul on Colours* (1859), in Judith Walsh, 'Winslow Homer and the Color Theories of Michel-Eugène Chevreul', in Martha Tedeschi and Kristi Dahm, eds, *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light*, Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, 2008, 199–205, here 199.

fig. 11

'The Market in Nassau, New Providence', *The Illustrated London News*, 5 January 1856



19

Bierstadt, 'Dreamy Susan: Part 2', n. 11, 182.

20

See 'The Market in Nassau, New Providence', in *The Illustrated London News*, 5 January 1856 [fig. 11], <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00010577/00001>.

21

The Black population originated as migrant captives of white planters shipped from Africa over the centuries. Between 1788 and 1807, the British took 9,560 African captives to the colony. After the British abolition of the Slave Trade in 1832–34, the British Navy freed thousands of African captives; see Helen A. Regis, ed., *Caribbean and Southern: Transnational Perspectives on the U.S. South*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2006, 40. In the following decades, hundreds of Black and Seminole subjects revolted and fled from Florida and other territories to the Bahamas; see Rosalyn Howard, 'The "Wild Indians" of Andros Island: Black Seminole Legacy in the Bahamas', *Journal of Black Studies* 37:2 (2006), 275–98.

22

Judith Bettelheim, 'From Masquerade to Fashion and Back', in Lowery Stokes Sims, Leslie King-Hammond, Naomi Beckwith and Martina D'Alton, *The Global Africa Project*, New York, Museum of Arts and Design, 2010, 162–67, here 163.

Besides the novel colour theories coming from France, Albert Bierstadt had access to other sources of artistic inspiration from the island's Afro-Bahamian population. Rosalie Bierstadt noted 'that fondness for bright colors, which is so pronounced in the African race', in her 1893 novella.<sup>19</sup> In the 19th century, one of the island's white tourist attractions was its Black community and its cultural expressions. Foreign visitors often associated the Afro-Bahamian population with African and middle-eastern peoples.<sup>20</sup> In an illustration accompanying the promotional article 'The Market in Nassau' from 1856 [fig. 11], the Black subjects are associated with the 'Arabian nights', the 'Queen of Sheba' and the 'Sphynx'. Most were first generation Afro-Bahamian, with a mix of ancestries between African, indigenous and white descending from residents in other Caribbean regions.<sup>21</sup> Although the link with African culture might not have been as direct as the white population imagined, Black subjects certainly participated from a wider diaspora culture shared throughout the Caribbean. On the occasion of *The Global Africa Project* exhibition that explored the 'Impact of African Visual Culture on Contemporary Art, Craft and Design around the World', the historian Judith Bettelheim identified 'high visibility within an urban mix among diasporic communities of African descent.'<sup>22</sup> The penchant for colour among the local Black population vindicated pride in their identity among the white population.

As his work reveals, Bierstadt noticed this taste for lively colours assigned to Afro-Bahamians during his first trip to the Bahamas in 1877. To paint *Street in Nassau*, he had to descend from the hill on top of which the Victoria Hotel stood and mingle with the Black subjects who went about their business in a non-segregated road. It is even possible that he witnessed Junkanoo, a Bahamian national festival celebrated on the mornings of Boxing Day and New Year. Although Bierstadt arrived after the official celebrations had taken place,<sup>23</sup> the tourist-centred economy of the island makes it plausible that there might have been Junkanoo simulacra performances outside the late-December and early-January festivities. Junkanoo consisted of a parade on Bay Street, the main white shopping thoroughfare, where Black subjects dressed up and performed dances and music taking over a space usually forbidden to them. This was the only moment of the year in which the Black population reclaimed its visibility and agency, and it built from West African legends and culture. Participants wore costumes of cloth and paper often decked with items specific to the islands, such as sea sponges and leaves, and painted their faces. The musicians played using instruments made with local products too, such as conch shells, horns and poinciana seed pods.<sup>24</sup>

Mention of Junkanoo is relevant in this discussion given the visual coincidences that exist between the figures in Bierstadt's painting and some of the festivity's characters. The attire of the market woman at the centre of the composition, who wears white and red clothes and a straw hat, is reminiscent of Junkanoo's 'Red Set Girls', who were the main dancers in the festivity's parade [fig. 12]. According to an early 19th-century witness who captured scenes from the celebration, the Red Set Girls would start dancing in the late morning and continue through the night. Like the market woman in Bierstadt's painting, they would appear in the company of green foliage, in this case encircling the character of 'Jack-in-the-Green', a person covered in coconut-tree leaves crowned with a red bow and flags.<sup>25</sup> This image connects with Bierstadt's painting, linking local traditions and tastes perceived as exotic by Anglo-American tourists with his rendered figures.

**23**

Albert Bierstadt arrived in Nassau on 4 March 1877 and stayed until 24 April of that year. Nancy K. Anderson, 'Chronology', in Anderson and Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art & Enterprise*, n. 12, 230.

**24**

'Junkanoo', Bahamas Government, [https://www.bahamas.gov.bs/wps/wcm/connect/MOF\\_Content/internet/The+Government/Residents/Culture/Junkanoo/](https://www.bahamas.gov.bs/wps/wcm/connect/MOF_Content/internet/The+Government/Residents/Culture/Junkanoo/).

**25**

'Red Set-Girls, and Jack-in-the-Green', in *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora*, <http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/2308>.



fig. 12

**Isaac Mendes Belisario**  
**'Red Set-Girls, and Jack-in-the-Green' (1836),**  
*Sketches of Character, in illustration of the habits, occupation, and costume of the Negro population, in the island of Jamaica: drawn after nature, and in lithography, Kingston, Jamaica, 1837-38, in *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora**

In addition to Junkanoo, a local product might have sparked Bierstadt's experimentation with colour: sponges. Afro-Bahamian men worked mostly in the harvesting of sponge, the colony's major export.<sup>26</sup> Helen A. Cooper astutely argues that when Winslow Homer visited the Bahamas in 1884, the local sponge industry defined his Bahamian oeuvre. I would like to extend Cooper's idea to Bierstadt's work, in particular to his technique of spreading patches of colour as if applied with a sponge, as opposed to the monotone colour washes seen in his sublime landscapes. Marine influences extended to other areas of island life too. It is interesting to note that Bahamian residents of European descent called themselves 'Conchs', for the crustaceans that could be fished in the sea.<sup>27</sup> One wonders if the Conch denomination for Caucasian people had to do with the paleness of the mollusk's shell, or with its material fragility.

26

Helen A. Cooper, 'Bahamas and Cuba 1884-1885', in *Winslow Homer Watercolors*, Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art; New Haven, Yale University Press, 1986, 131-49.

27

Byrd, 'Trouble in Paradise?', n. 6, 108.



Collecting sponge was a taxing activity that forced the local fishermen to dive in the sea and endure the scorching sun for months-long expeditions. Black Bahamians certainly shared the porosity of a living creature adaptable to the flow of their changing environment, as survivors of the Middle Passage and of enslavement and their legacies.

Colour was political. The fate of millions of Black people in the United States was at stake in the 1870s given the violent white supremacist efforts to revert the racial order of chattel enslavement. Following the ratification of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth amendments that abolished slavery, guaranteed citizenship and promised equal protection under the law, the Fifteenth Amendment established that the right of citizens to vote 'shall not be denied or abridged [...] on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude'.<sup>28</sup> In response to the newfound freedoms of Black Americans, enraged white supremacists validated associations like the Ku Klux Klan and gave way to the racial segregation policies known as the Jim Crow Laws of the 1880s.<sup>29</sup> In this context, 'colour' as the conceptual name for skin shade mattered. It was on the basis of body colour that people were denied their rights, tortured and murdered. Against the apparent lightness of the scene depicted in *Street in Nassau*, it is important to note that all the people in the painting are Black, and that there are no brushstrokes of pure white colour. Colour pervades the work, with the wall on the left likely shielding a white-owned villa, hidden and safeguarded behind the prominent tree cover. The Afro-Bahamian huts that appear further down the road have no protecting wall. The white world is secured by structures with deep foundations, the Black world is vulnerable to the structural racism that segregated on perceived differences in colour.

**28**  
Fifteenth Amendment, Section 1, United States Constitution, ratified in 1870.

**29**  
Michael Harriot, '1869–1874: Reconstruction', in Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain, *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America 1619–2019*, London, Penguin Vintage, 2022, 235.

## Paths to becoming

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The experimental character of *Street in Nassau* stems from new epistemological issues as well, crystallised by the road that recedes into the background. Historical scholar Lois Marie Fink states that images of paths 'signified the act of going, the process of flux and change inherent in many late nineteenth-century experiences, and linked with contemporary concerns of "becoming" as opposed to "being"'.<sup>30</sup> Flux, passage, transitioning from one point to another was symbolised through the road motif and exercised via the movement of the eye induced by its composition. Beyond being a mere painting about a trip, *Street in Nassau* embodies the trip, as ambassador of a culture composed of movement and dispersion: the African diaspora. The protagonists of the painting are all Black people, African descendants in a British colonial island, a people in political flux. In 1877–80, Afro-Bahamians were British subjects in the Caribbean.

The processual character of becoming ties into the politics of slavery in poignant ways. Christina Sharpe introduces the term 'Trans\*Atlantic' as 'that s/place, condition, or process that appears alongside and in relation to the Black Atlantic but also in excess of its currents' where 'Trans\*' is 'about or toward the range of transformations enacted on and by Black bodies'.<sup>31</sup> In addition to this reflection, Dionne Brand argues that 'that one door [of no return, the door in the Coast Castle on Ghana's Gold Coast] transformed us into bodies emptied of being, bodies emptied of self-interpretation, into which new interpretations could be placed'.<sup>32</sup> The emptiness to which Brand refers resulted from the trauma of the Middle Passage. The motif of the road in Bierstadt's painting seems an appropriate setting for the Black diasporic bodies to walk, one in which metaphorically they can fill their emptied beings with potential becomings.

Bierstadt probably started the painting in 1877, the year following the major celebrations of the United States centennial. He lent six paintings to the Philadelphia Centennial

### 30

Fink, *American Art at the Nineteenth-Century Paris Salons*, n. 16, 231.

### 31

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016, 30.

### 32

Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, Toronto, Doubleday Canada, 2001, 25.



fig. 13

**Albert Bierstadt*****Entrance into Monterey, 1876*****Oil on canvas, 182.9 × 304.8 cm****Collection of the United States House  
of Representatives**

Exposition and almost certainly visited the fair. One painting, *Entrance into Monterey* [fig. 13], depicts an episode of the origins of the colonised West Coast, with the Spanish conquistadors gathered under a tree around a cross atop an altar celebrating mass in the middle ground; in the foreground, a group of indigenous people observe them while admiring the domestic animals which the colonisers brought with them. Bierstadt was considering the earlier history of his country around this time for the purpose of the exhibition. The world fair was relevant not only because almost ten million people – one fourth of the US population at the time – attended, but especially because it celebrated the first hundred years of US history since its foundation. It was a moment of reckoning, of self-reflection; the definition of a national identity was at stake.

After the Civil War had divided the country, this exhibition sought to suture the dismembered nation. It attempted to do this by looking at the past in order to shape a new model for the future.<sup>33</sup> It is an interesting circumstance that precisely at this moment of inner reflection about the past, present and future of the country, Bierstadt, the painter of US Western expansionism, should have travelled to the British Bahamian tourist paradise.

The US sections of the Centennial Exposition advanced the idea that the country had British roots, and that it was the country's British colonial past that should bind its citizens.<sup>34</sup> In 1877, besides being a tourist resort, the British island of the Bahamas was a haven for British loyalists fleeing the war, the result of which the centennial paradoxically celebrated. Moreover, it became the main harbour connecting Confederate states with the rest of the world during the Civil War after President Abraham Lincoln set a blockade to the Confederate ports to cut their supplies. How did this troubled legacy fit into the becoming of the United States? How did the United States look to Bierstadt, an artist of German descent and shaper of US nationalistic ideas, from the British colony run on the backs of segregated Black Bahamians?

**33**

Kimberly Orcutt, *Power & Posterity: American Art at Philadelphia's 1876 Centennial Exhibition*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017.

**34**

The Centennial Exhibition featured examples of New English products and history as the solution to the country's fragmentation. According to Mary Elizabeth Boone, 'English-speaking Protestants on the northeastern seaboard [were presented as] the ancestral founders and therefore the inheritors of the nation'. Mary Elizabeth Boone, *The Spanish Element in Our Nationality: Spain and America at the World's Fairs and Centennial Celebrations, 1876-1915*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019, 41.



fig. 14

**Winslow Homer**  
**Children under a Palm Tree, 1885**  
 Watercolour and pencil on paper,  
 35.6 × 50.8 cm  
 Private collection



35

There were conch carvings, aloë rope, silver, china and Dresden china, jewellery, lacework, corals, shells, straw work, ivory work, pottery and glass work, Indian slippers, Burmese shoes, Chinese daggers and silk sashes, among others. 'The Bahamas Loan Exhibition', *Nassau Guardian* (2 December 1885), University of Florida, George A. Smathers Library, Digital Library of the Caribbean, Caribbean Newspapers, 2, <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00076890/02873/2?search=nassau+%3dguardian>; 'Bahamas Loan Exhibition', *Nassau Guardian* (5 December 1885), University of Florida, George A. Smathers Library, Digital Library of the Caribbean, Caribbean Newspapers, <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00076890/02874/1x>; 'Bahamas Loan Exhibition', *Nassau Guardian* (12 December 1885), 2, <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00076890/02876/2x>.

36

See Martha Tedeschi, 'Memoranda of Travel: The Tropics', in Martha Tedeschi and Kristi Dahm, *Watercolors by Winslow Homer: The Color of Light*, Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, 2008, 170–98; and Byrd, 'Trouble in Paradise?', n. 6, 102–40.

## Afterlives

On 1 December 1885, Sir Henry Arthur Blake, British Governor of the Bahamas, inaugurated the First Bahamas Loan Exhibition. Bierstadt's 'exquisite sketches', as the local press characterised them, appeared on display next to 'so many rare and pretty things'.<sup>35</sup> The works Bierstadt created on the island hung together with all kinds of local and global products that were an expression of the international commercial network in which the island participated. Winslow Homer was another of the artists who visited the Bahamas and contributed to its tourist promotion. On an assignment from *Century Magazine*, this artist painted, among other things, the three children of the island's governor, clad in oriental costume and studying an undefined object under a palm tree [fig. 14]. Palm branches show up in two places at left and right, imbuing with Caribbean exoticism the otherwise vague setting. It is remarkable that of all the watercolours he made during his trip to the Bahamas in 1885,<sup>36</sup> the only time that Homer painted white people he set them in foreign costume framed by a tropical plant, a fact that located them in a cultural limbo of exoticism yet anchored them in the Caribbean. The image points to the artificiality of the white presence on the island, only able to signify when disguised.



fig. 15  
**Winslow Homer**  
*Dressing for the Carnival, 1877*  
 Oil on canvas, 50.8 × 76.2 cm  
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
 New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund,  
 1922, 22.220

In 1877 Homer, too, made a poignant painting of a group of African American people gathered to celebrate the Fourth of July – US Independence Day – in Virginia, with one man clad as a Junkanoo character [fig. 15]. He stands at the centre of the composition, wearing a patchwork blouse, trousers and cap that combine fragments of brightly coloured fabrics. Behind him a child riding astride a lad's back holds the US flag, as does another young boy wearing a cap and sucking his fingers. As the Fourth of July became a common festivity in the South, the characters of Homer's painting fused the celebration of the country's independence with the most festive Black diasporic-wide event, visually bringing together their pride in their diasporic roots and in the nation-state in colourful fabric creations. In both Homer paintings, the main character is wearing a combination of red, yellow and white clothes, and the sun critically impacts on these hues, lightening or darkening their tone. This attests to the changing perception of colour as affected by natural phenomena and points of view. In contrast to Bierstadt's *Street in Nassau*, *Dressing for the Carnival* renders its characters from up close, focusing on the drama of becoming, with one woman sewing the final touch on the Junkanoo-clad man. The quality of becoming takes centre stage in a painting of African diasporic US American subjects.

Rosalie Bierstadt passed away in Nassau in 1893, the year in which the United States celebrated its second major international exhibition, the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The world fair boasted US achievements after 500 years of European colonisation of the Americas. As if closing a vital cycle in the haven of healing for her, the last breath Rosalie took was the balmy Bahamian air. Nearing the end of his life, Albert, her husband, made *The Golden Gate* in 1900 [fig. 4], replicating the breaking wave that he had painted for the first time during his second trip to the Bahamas in 1878. The same wave is featured in two more paintings, adding to a total of four appearances in his body of work.<sup>37</sup> Although the wave is without doubt a version of a Bahamian phenomenon, the site identified in the title is the one-mile-wide (1.6 km) strait connecting San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean in the US West Coast. How remarkable that one of his last paintings should have depicted a Bahamian view placed in the US Pacific shoreline, projecting the country by sea to the rest of the world on the opposite side of the United Kingdom. With this landscape, in which boats cross the sea and a rainbow illuminates the stormy sky, Bierstadt seems to have been looking towards the future of the United States, in which African Americans play a larger role. ●

**37**

Albert Bierstadt, *Beach at Nassau*, 1877?, whereabouts unknown; *The Shore of the Turquoise Sea*, 1878, Manoogian Collection, Detroit [fig. 6]; *After a Norther, Bahamas*, after 1878, Haggin Museum, Stockton; and *The Golden Gate*, 1900, private collection [fig. 4].