Original Article

Materiality, iconic nature, and Albert Bierstadt's "Great Pictures"

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Abstract This article builds on the cultural sociological program for the study of materiality, material symbolism, and iconic power. Having a theoretical basis in Durkheim's claims regarding the social potency of totems and other material symbols, two new concepts – *sensuous surface* and *conductive surface* – are introduced. These concepts, which distinguish between icons' formal aesthetic power and their power as repositories and conduits of symbolic principles of control, elaborate and extend Jeffrey Alexander's notion of iconic surface. The analytical purchase of these concepts is demonstrated in an analysis of the works of the 19th century American landscape painter Albert Bierstadt. Bierstadt played a key role in the genesis of the variety of *iconic nature* – the aesthetically potent, symbolically resonant, and conductively efficacious image of the physical landscape – characteristic of American modernity. The sensuous features of Bierstadt's work offer a representation of nature carrying constitutive power that is autonomous from its symbolic resonances. This case is significant, given the role played by iconic nature in modern American experience. By shining light on the genetic roots of the American variety of iconic nature, this article helps nuance accounts of the role played by material symbols in the process of cultural differentiation.
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Introduction

Notions of materiality and material symbolism have gained traction in sociology of late. Building upon Émile Durkheim's foundational claims regarding the essentially symbolic constitution of society (Malczewski, 2013, 2014, pp. 349–356) and the significance of the material form taken by totemic principles (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], pp. 190–241), the "iconic turn"

aims to shine light on the symbolic principles of control (hereafter, simply called symbolic principles) found in certain concretizations of social life that shape action and help comprise its constitutive environments (Alexander, 2008, 2010, 2012; Bartmanski, 2012, 2014; Bartmanski and Alexander, 2012; Bartmanski and Woodward, 2015; Smith, 2012; Sztompka, 2012; Woodward, 2007; Woodward and Ellison, 2012; Cf. Riley, 2013; Watts Miller, 2013; Fournier, 2013). Key to this inquiry is the view of material in its role as physical repository for and conduit of symbolic conceptions. The signal contribution of the iconic turn is that it provides leverage on the question of the ways in which material symbols shape social action in their concomitant provision of sensuous qualities and symbolic principles by interrogating the sociological significance of aesthetic power. The iconic turn helps account for the effect of symbolic vehicles' material form by examining the aesthetic power such vehicles exert on actors in actors' interaction with them. The central contention of the iconic turn is that material symbols constitute a vista on social consciousness and manifest autonomous effective properties – namely, "surface" aesthetic power (Alexander, 2008, 2010, 2012) – extending beyond and complementing its component discursive or representational elements. Icons are seen not only to index social processes but to help constitute social forces.

Although the iconic turn is linked genetically to the Durkheimian tradition, concern with the manner through which material or physical phenomena index, affect, and effect social order and action is marked in the thought of the two other luminaries of the classical tradition, Karl Marx and Max Weber. To wit, Marx's remarkable answer to Ludwig Feuerbach – that the cherry tree (and, indeed, the broader landscape that it represents) giving rise to Feuerbach's experience of "sensuous certainty" is a material effect of social forces – confronted the problem concerning the extent to which the sensuous world is in key respects the product of social development and is not "a thing given direct from all eternity" (Marx, 1845–1846, p. 170; Cf. 1845, pp. 143–145; and, Marx, 1845–1846, pp. 146–200). Weber's sociology of music makes patent that even sound waves produced by a piano embody profound symbolic organizing principles – e.g., the logic and history of musical notation co-emerging with the standardization of instruments, both of which have roots in western monasticism and feudal guilds (Weber, 1958; Cf. Turley, 2001, pp. 638). Such symbolic principles and the experiences to which they give rise, moreover, condition normative evaluation of sound and inform aesthetic ontologies.[1] Emphatically, the metatheory informing the iconic turn sees symbolic principles as the *explanans* of human social order, and, for this reason, it embraces Weber who places meaning (*Sinn*) at the center of sociological inquiry and parts ways

[1] This is evidenced, for example, in the reception of Benjamin Britten's 1943 *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings*. Julian Johnson notes that audiences at the premiere were bewildered by the "out-of-tune" quality produced as a result of Britten's directive not to use the valves on the French horns – modern improvements to this classic instrument (Johnson, 2015, p. 196).

with Marx who sees it as epiphenomenal (Malczewski, 2014, pp. 349–356, 2015). Material symbolism, while focused on physical qualities and their social potency, hence is not material*ist* in the historical materialist sense.

This article takes up the challenge to appreciate the value of material symbols in human society by elaborating an analytical perspective that helps to illuminate how their formal aesthetic power along with their power as conduits of symbolic principles articulate with collective representations, thus shining light on facets central to understanding what Bernhard Giesen has called icons' identity forging power (2012, p. 9). The purchase of this view is demonstrated by its central case, an analysis of the sociological significance of the celebrated works of the 19th century American landscape painter Albert Bierstadt. Bierstadt's work played a key role in the rise of the iconic image of nature characteristic of American modernity. The sensuous features of this work (e.g., their largeness) and their symbolically shaped content (e.g., the pronounced synthetic composition – as opposed to literal representation of landscape) offered a vision of nature that remains influential. This case is significant given the role played by *iconic nature* – the aesthetically potent, symbolically resonant, and conductively efficacious image of the physical landscape – in the emergence of the environmental worldview of the past century and the more recent dismantling by scholars of the conception of wilderness or pristine nature and the environmental ontologies to which it has given rise (e.g., Callicott and Nelson, 1998, 2008; Cronon, 1992, 1995, 1996; Macnaghten and Urry, 1998; Merchant, 1995; Marangudakis, 2001, 2006; Marangudakis and Hayes, 2001; White, 1967). In sum, by providing insight into the material symbols undergirding the struggle between conservators of iconic nature and iconoclasts, this article shines light on the process of cultural differentiation and nuances accounts of consciousness of nature by linking symbolic frameworks to the potent aesthetic qualities of visual phenomena.

Theoretical Framework

Examination of the putative autonomous motive force of symbolic organizing principles constitutes the foundation of sociological inquiry (Malczewski, 2014, 2015). Within the program for the study of material symbols, the study of icons, and iconic power – that is to say, the study of the visual aspect (*icon*: likeness or image; from the Greek *eik-ōn*) of material symbolic life – draws into the examination an analysis of the visually perceptible aesthetic qualities of the material vehicles that help make the social sensual. This is not to overstate the distinction between the sensual and the social but to highlight the value of marking analytically the contribution of the experience and interpretation of form of physical structure to understanding action. In a theoretical framework lending itself to not only sociological but also historical understanding, Jeffrey

Alexander's concepts of iconic depth and iconic surface (2008, 2010; Cf. Bartmanski and Alexander, 2012; Alexander 2012) grasp two crucial aspects of material symbols.

Alexander's concept of iconic depth invites sociologists to focus on the symbolic organizing principles that give material symbols their distinctively social causal power. The concept of iconic depth – or, given its applicability for material symbols generally, *symbolic depth* – denotes the set of symbolic principles embodied by or concretized in the material object. These principles provide the conditions and structure of action qua action (Malczewski, 2015), but they are not deterministic. Here the emphasis is placed on the represented symbolic content, or the discursive and moral meaning (Alexander, 2012), which is analogous to Durkheim's totemic principle (1995 [1912]; Cf. Sherwood, 2006, p. 83). Examination of material symbols from this standpoint not only enables descriptive analysis of *what* the symbols are, what they mean, and what they indicate about the social context in which they are found, but examination from this standpoint also maintains at the forefront of inquiry the much more important and valuable charges of explaining *why* these symbols and the organizing principles by which they hang together exist and what social power they manifest. The metaphor of depth calls to mind questions about core principles, root causes, and genetic understanding – the kind of question that distinguishes theoretical development from mere description. The concept of depth places us on territory very familiar to cultural sociology by offering a vista on the principles of control specified in their symbolic aspect that index, animate, and sustain action and social order as well as condition processes of social differentiation. This territory can thus be explored so as to grasp the nature of affect, cognition, and the significance of the elementary instances of action upon which cultural sociology's theoretical entities are based (Malczewski, 2015, pp. 526–535). In this way, the concept offers a clear view of the goal of analysis.

Alexander's concept of iconic surface denotes the feature of aesthetically charged material form. From this analytical standpoint, symbolic principles are bracketed so as to grasp and highlight the material qualities (e.g., luminosity, amplitude, texture, etc.) that invite engagement from actors' primary senses. In Durkheim's influential argument, "material intermediaries" are seen not only to index collective mental states but also to contribute to their making and reproduction – they are constitutive elements (Durkheim, 1960 [1912], p. 330; [Durkheim, 1995 [1912], pp. 231–232; see also 190–241). Alexander's concept of iconic surface brings under the same umbrella two independent forces, forces that pertain to constitution and to transmission or reproduction, respectively. Here I develop two new concepts that build upon Durkheim's and Alexander's insights, so as to gain leverage on different aspects – the autonomous contribution of form and the transmission of symbolic principles – of material symbolism.

Sensuous surface is the actualized aesthetic power of material form. Form is analytically emphasized to discover its effect on the constitution of symbolic

experience. Material symbols differ from mere material objects both in their bearing a dimension of symbolic depth and in being aesthetically or sensuously resonant. All material objects compose a multitude of qualities (e.g., a given weight, color, texture, pitch, scent) of which any may be potentially significant aesthetically. The sociologically relevant qualities are those revealed in action to be salient, to signify social value (Alexander, 2010, p. 11). Aesthetic power hence is empirically accessible. In Durkheim's classic illustration, patterns of movement in aboriginal mimicry of totemic species during mimetic rites, likenesses of totemic species in visual representations, or vocal imitation of the cry of the plover or other creatures evidence the salience of various aesthetic aspects of socially constitutive phenomena (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], pp. 355–373; also see 225–231). These first-order descriptions or "minimal interpretations" (Reed, 2011, pp. 21–50) bracket theoretical explanation, yet, even at this elementary level of description, they demonstrate a clear dependence on the power of material form for the resulting action.

Conductive surface is the actualized power of a material object for transmitting symbolic principles. At issue here is the efficacy of the material object as a repository and conduit of symbolic content. Material symbols are not mere matter – they are matter transformed. Containing a power to represent society figuratively, material symbols are phenomena of a different order than mere material objects.[2] As Durkheim puts it, "collective feeling…participates in the nature of the object" (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], p. 238). From a theoretical standpoint, material objects serve to awaken states of consciousness. As a matter of first-order description, it is enough that material symbols function as symbols in their environments. Conductive surface is in evidence when material symbols are effective as such, when their quality as symbols is recognized.[3] To wit, when *wakan* is perceived in the totem (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], p. 198) or America is perceived in "Old Glory," the material object's role in transmitting or reproducing symbolic principles is manifest.[4] Material symbols constitute important components of environments of action, and understanding their efficacy in transmitting symbolic principles and the extent to which they may be

[2] This power is a constitutive property of material symbols. It is through empirical analysis that knowledge of this power is known. A sidetrack into the metaphysics of social causal powers is unnecessary here. It is enough for science that the powers of material symbols are postulated as theoretical entities and critiqued on the basis of theoretical analysis and evidence.

[3] Hence the perceptibility of material symbols is assumed. McDonnell defines perceptibility as the "physical availability of an object" (2010, p. 1805). By this he means literally the extent to which an object can be a reached by actors' senses. As McDonnell helpfully illustrates, a material symbols' perceptibility may be increased or reduced according to its setting (1820–1828).

[4] The power of symbolic principles to exert control over action (whether as condition or cause) at the core of the concept of symbolic depth may be actualized in varying ways. The program for the study of material symbols does not see actors as cultural dopes. As McDonnell's (2010, pp. 1807–1808) and de Certeau's (2002, p. xiii; cited in McDonnell) work suggests, actors have the capacity both to interpret the intended meanings of material symbols and to realize unintended meanings and uses.

said to be regenerative or replicative – in addition to the degree to which they are present in those environments and accessible – allows gauging opportunities for exposure both to aesthetic power and symbolic principles.[5] By emphasizing exposure to symbolic principles attributable to qualities of the material objects, the concept of conductive surface draws into the center of inquiries of iconic power the question of the efficacy of material symbols in their role in symbolic reproduction and social transformation.

The program for the study of material symbols articulated here calls for the examination of the actualized power of symbolic depth, sensuous surface, and conductive surface. The method employed has two stages. So as to evidence the power of material symbols, it first takes events wherein socially current material symbols are objects of orientation – whether through practice, discourse, rational elaboration, etc. – and marks the aspects of such orientation bearing on sensual resonance (sensuous surface) and symbolic location (symbolic depth), and it then establishes the degree to which the material symbols in question (conductive surface) are objects of social experience. Although this article places an emphasis on icons – visual images – the concepts are valid for the analysis of material symbols generally. Tactile, gustatory, aural, and scent objects are equally amenable to analysis within this framework. The concepts of symbolic depth and sensuous surface shine light on the ways that material objects are constitutive qualitatively – i.e., symbolically and aesthetically, respectively. The concept of conductive surface shines light on the ways material objects are efficacious as objects of qualitative experience. The value of replacing Alexander's general concept of surface with the more specific concepts of sensuous surface and conductive surface is that doing so makes clear the distinct manners through which sensual features of material objects play a role in constituting collective representations and – importantly – highlights the question as to how material symbols may be constitutive in terms of the efficacy they manifest qua material symbols. In order to understand how the forces extant in material symbols become actualized, and, particularly, to grasp how symbolically significant and sensually resonant phenomena shape consciousness, sociological analysis of material symbols must build a case marshaling evidence of the effective exposure to material symbols and the transformations which they enable.

This article is not advancing a deterministic material metatheory, metaphysics, or ontology (Cf. Malczewski, 2015, pp. 530–535; especially, 532). The appreciation of the role of material symbols in the constitution of social life advocated here must not be mistaken for an argument that takes material qualities as being determinative in a strict autonomous manner. The effects on actors attributed to the experience of sensuous form are empirical matters; such

[5] Recent work draws attention to the importance of the physical availability of material symbols as well as the influence of physical setting on their accessibility (McDonnell, 2010; Griswold *et al*, 2013). Questions addressed in these works complement inquiries into the efficacy of conductive surface.

effects are seen theoretically to be underdetermined. It is actors' collective interaction with material objects that confers on the latter sociologically relevant form, and it is actors' interaction with such objects that reveals these objects' sensuous and conductive powers as well as the power of symbolic depth. The concepts of sensuous surface and conductive surface refer to distinct actualized powers of material symbols. The term "actualized" serves to emphasize that it is via actors' interactions with material symbols that the putatively latent powers of material symbols come to be known.

Socially constitutive powers of material objects are revealed in actors' interactions with them.[6] In this way, the concepts of symbolic depth, sensuous surface, and conductive surface resonate with claims drawing on the heuristic notion of "affordances" employed in studies of materiality (Acord and DeNora, 2008, p. 228; Anderson and Sharrock, 1993, pp. 146–149; DeNora, 2000, pp. 39–40, 99, and 106; 2003, 170–173; 2014, pp. 91–94, 103, and 136; Gibson 2006, pp. 175, 179–183; Griswold et al. 2013, pp. 346–348; McDonnell, 2010, pp. 1805–1808).[7] The marked advantage of the concepts of symbolic depth, sensuous surface, and conductive surface over the notion of affordances is that these concepts analytically separate different kinds of phenomena enabled in or afforded by the engagement with material objects. As the discussion of Albert Bierstadt's work makes clear, symbolic principles embodied in the material object are distinct from the object's power to transmit such principles, and both of these are distinct from the aesthetic power of material form.

Albert Bierstadt's Iconic Nature

In 1966 *Art in America* magazine posed the question "Can nature imitate art?" (Haverstock, 1966, p. 73).[8] At stake was an appreciation of the role played by

[6] As Griswold, Mangione, and McDonnell show, contingent factors such as "the physical distance or intimacy between audiences and art objects" and "how bodies are oriented to experience and move through exhibition spaces" contribute to understanding how experience is shaped by material symbols (2013, p. 351). Such analyses highlight perceptual psychological considerations in assessing outcomes.

[7] The idea of an affordance was originally James Gibson's (1986 [1979]) and was theoretically embedded in debates in perceptual psychology. Anderson and Sharrock (1993) reconceived the idea for the field of computer-supported cooperative work. Tia DeNora has made the most use of the idea sociologically, and a review of uses and citation patterns of the idea of affordances indicates that DeNora's view of the matter is taken as authoritative. As DeNora claims, "objects do not offer, in any fixed sense, some pre-given set of affordances that can be described in advance of how objects come to be used. One cannot make definitive lists of what something means, what it might offer users, independent of use, because use (realignment, reappropriation) may profoundly transform what we discover about objects" (2014, p. 93; Cf. 2014, pp. 91–94, 103, and 136).

[8] Questions of this kind have been raised before. In one well-known instance, Oscar Wilde argued that "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life" and claimed that it followed from this that "external Nature also imitates Art. The only effects that she can show us are effects that we have

the U.S. National Park Service, which was then marking its fiftieth anniversary, in maintaining an image of the natural landscape originally realized and introduced to the American public by a handful of mid-19th century American artists. The most celebrated landscape artists of the period are mentioned – Albert Bierstadt, Frederic Church, and Thomas Moran, three artists who created several of what were at the time the most famous and influential American paintings. The question – "Can nature imitate art?" – assumes new significance when interpreted with the cultural sociological view of material symbolism in mind: What role does iconic nature play in shaping experience? To address this question, here I offer a brief examination of the contribution of Albert Bierstadt in shaping the American variety of iconic nature. Using the tools developed in the preceding section, this inquiry illuminates the analytical purchase of the concepts of sensuous surface, symbolic depth, and conductive surface while drawing attention to some of the ways in which Bierstadt's iconic paintings give form to and stabilize symbolic organizing principles. Examination of Bierstadt's works as material symbols reveals the complex intertwining character of objects of "sensuous certainty" and moral life.

Sensuous Surface: "Great Pictures"

Albert Bierstadt's most celebrated paintings are characterized by their pronounced physical amplitude. For Bierstadt's contemporaries, such amplitude was not merely incidental to the sensuous experience of the works: it was a well-noted central feature. Among the conventions of the mid-19th century art world was that of the "Great Picture," the public exposition of exceptionally large paintings (Anderson and Ferber, 1990, p. 24). This convention pertained especially to American landscape paintings. Originating in England (Carr, 1986), the term "Great Picture" referred not only to the size of the paintings being exhibited – which is my focus here – but also to the manner of their display. Great Pictures were often shown in purpose-built studios as part of single-painting exhibitions – this at a time when hanging conventions dictated filling wall space and leaving nary a gap of space between the frames (Mayer and Myers, 1999, p. 57). As the art critic James Jackson Jarves noted in his highly influential book of 1864, *The Art Idea: Sculpture, Painting and Architecture in America*, "bigness, greatness, largeness" was the current vogue in American landscape painting – "that thoroughly American branch of painting" (231–232).

Albert Bierstadt was a master of the genre. His Great Pictures were among the largest canvases exhibited at the time, being cut by the yard rather than by the foot. His *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* (hereafter, *Rocky Mountains*)

already seen through poetry, or in paintings. This is the secret of Nature's charm, as well as the explanation of Nature's weakness" (1891, pp. 44–45; Cf. 1889).

of 1863 measures 73.5 inches by 120.75 inches or just over 60 square feet of surface. *Among the Sierra Nevada, California* of 1868 is nearly identical in size. *Domes of the Yosemite* of 1867 measures 116 inches by 180 inches or about 9 by 15 feet. When *Rocky Mountains* was exhibited in the Picture Gallery at the Metropolitan Sanitary Fair of 1864, one viewer thought it to be a panorama, asking "when the thing was going to move" (Jarves, 1864, p. 254). During its exhibition at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867, it was the largest of 75 pictures displayed in the American gallery (Leslie, 1868, pp. 9, 12). As the United States Commissioner reported, "perhaps in all respects the most conspicuous picture in the American gallery, was Bierstadt's 'Rocky Mountains'" (Leslie, 1868, p. 12). The salience of the large size of Bierstadt's work is evidenced further in the views of critics. One critic, writing in the *New Path*, claimed of *Rocky Mountains* that "twenty times the study that the artist has given to this picture, – study represented by actual sketches, built upon a previous ten years…would not have justified him in attempting to fill so large a canvas" (*New Path*, April 1864, p. 161). Another critic, in contrast, validated the scale of the much larger *Domes of the Yosemite* writing "The works of most European landscapists are but mere muddy daubs when compared with this last great picture. We do not attach any importance to the size of the picture; in this case it required size to do justice to the subject; but it is the grasp, the daring and the matchless breadth exhibited in this picture that makes it great as a large one" (Mayer [undated]). Howsoever the merit of the work was evaluated, the aesthetic power of the paintings' large size evidently was palpable.

The scale of these canvases was taken to index their subject matter, the expansive mountain ranges of the new American frontier. In this way, the aesthetic power of the large canvases was intertwined with a minimal interpretation of the qualities of the physical landscape. Bierstadt first visited the Rocky Mountains in 1859 and the Sierra Nevada mountains in 1863 (Anderson and Ferber, 1990: 23; Trump, 1963, pp. 62 and 82). During the latter trip, he spent over seven weeks camping and sketching in Yosemite Valley (Trump, 1963, p. 119; Ludlow, 1870, p. 419). According to contemporary reports, the imagery communicated by his paintings was believed – rightly, as some saw it – to be of extraordinary physical size. As Samuel Bowles, the well-known and respected editor of the *Springfield Republican* and author of the best-selling works *Across the Continent* (1867) and *Our New West* (1869), put it, "The eastern half of America offers no suggestion of its western half" (1869, p. v). The basis of this view was Bowles' firsthand experience of the American West and its mountain ranges. Others echo his view. In Fitz Hugh Ludlow's widely read account of his western travels of 1863 (first published in New York's *The Evening Post*, in several editions of the 1864 *Atlantic Monthly*, and, later, as the 1870 book *The Heart of the Continent: A Record of Travel Across the Plains and in Oregon with an Examination of the Mormon Principle*) he claimed the following:

> In the East there is nothing to illustrate the Rocky Mountains by…Mountain billows westward after mountain, their crests climbing as they go; and far on, where you might suppose the Plains began again, break on a spotless strand of everlasting snow. This snow indicates the top of the range. But of what range? Not the top of the Rocky Mountains, but only of a small minor range in that range. That glittering ridge yonder is but one of a hundred lying parallel with it to the westward. We have not even yet seen the Rocky Mountains. (Ludlow, 1870, pp. 142–144; Cf. Ludlow, 1863, 1864a, b, c)

The dimensions of the canvas helped shape understanding and interpretation of the scale of the represented landscape, suggesting to those out East, from New York to London, Paris, and Rome, what American nature consisted of.

Symbolic Depth: Composition vs. Transcription

Like all artworks, Bierstadt's paintings were viewed by their audiences through a set of orienting symbolic principles, many of which were seen to be embodied or realized in Bierstadt's paintings. A key aspect of the symbolic depth embodied in Bierstadt's paintings are the views of the role of the landscape artist in mid-19th century America – specifically, the views of the artist either as an interpreter or as a transcriber of the landscape.[9] Roughly cut, there were two polar stances on the matter: one advocating composition and one advocating transcription. Bierstadt's work was characterized as being of the former type. Jarves remarked on the composed qualities of Bierstadt's (and Frederic Church's) paintings, writing

[9] Although a more complete discussion of the other facets of the symbolic depth of Bierstadt's paintings cannot be offered due to limitations of space, many of these facets should be well-known to readers. American mission, manifest destiny, and romanticism, to name a few, are rather important. Another was the notion of American national greatness. Writing, for instance, about *Domes of the Yosemite*, the New York columnist cited above claimed "This picture will advance Mr. Bierstadt's reputation…We recommend our readers to go at once and see the work. They will feel that the world is progressing and the Americans are a great people" (Mayer [undated]; my emphasis). Themes such as American national greatness were not only communicated through imagery but also via interpretive texts available at exhibitions of the paintings. Bierstadt's pamphlet for *Rocky Mountains*, Linda Ferber notes, "concluded with the hope that, upon the painting's foreground plain, 'a city, populated by our descendants, may rise, and in its art-galleries this picture may eventually find a resting-place'" (1990, p. 25). Henry Tuckerman claimed "No more genuine and grand American work has been produced in landscape art than Bierstadt's 'Rocky Mountains.' Representing the sublime range which guards the remote West, its subject is eminently national" (1867, p. 396). Here we see not only evidence of symbolic depth but also what Jeffrey Alexander calls the interpretive or hermeneutic power of the critic (2012) amplifying symbolic depth. (For more on the link between national identity and the arts see Benoit 2011.)

> Each composes his pictures from actual sketches, with the desire to render the general truths and spirit of the localities of their landscapes, though often departing from the literal features of the view. With singular inconsistency of mind they idealize in composition and materialize in execution, so that, though the details of the scenery are substantially correct, the scene as a whole often is false. (1864, p. 191)

Another critic noted, "Judging…by numerous photographs of this range…we doubt the scenic fidelity of Mr. Bierstadt's landscape" (*New York Evening Post* 1870, p. 1). The *Boston Transcript* of April 22, 1863 noted that "Bierstadt's *Rocky Mountain* picture is attracting many lovers of art to the Studio Building…*Ideal or real*, the mountains have a grandeur and solidity quite unapproached in any other work, ancient or modern, foreign or American" (*Boston Transcript*; my emphasis). Commenting on *Storm in the Rocky Mountains*, the *London Saturday Review* wrote

> The qualities which strike us in Mr. Bierstadt, as an artist, are, first, a great audacity, justified by perfect ability to accomplish all that he intends. *He is not a mere copyist of nature, but an artist having definite artistic intentions, and carrying them out with care and resolution. Observe, for instance, how strictly in this work everything is arranged to enhance effect. It strikes you at once as a work of art, not a literal production of nature…[Bierstadt is] given to plotting and planning for purely artistic ends*. (Tuckerman, 1867, pp. 394–395; my emphasis)

Some contemporaries objected to Bierstadt's representations of the geological formations. Clarence King, who led the geological expedition of the 40th parallel from 1867 to 1873, wrote in 1872, "It's all Bierstadt and Bierstadt and Bierstadt nowadays! What has he done but twist and skew and distort and discolor and be-little and be-pretty this whole doggoned country? Why his mountains are too high and slim; they'd blow over in one of our fall winds…" (1935 [1872], p. 223). Bierstadt's mountains were known for being imposing, if not exactly geologically satisfying. King protested the effect such representations had on consciousness of the American landscape. Other reports from the field appear to vindicate Bierstadt's representations. The great explorer John Wesley Powell claimed that there are two aspects or classes of mountain scenery: one, "vast masses piled up in gentle declivities to the clouds…mountains with towering forms that seem ready to topple in the first storm"; and, two, "mountains in masses that seem to frown at the tempests" (Powell, 2003 [1875], pp. 386–389). Bierstadt's mountain cliffs, Powell writes, are painted such that "an eagle is lost from sight ere he reaches the summit…the traveler on the brink looks from afar and is overwhelmed with the sublimity of massive forms; the traveler among the gorges stands in the presence of awful mysteries, profound, solemn, and gloomy" (p. 389). Dr. Lafayette Houghton Bunnell, who

during the war with the Yosemite Indians in 1851 was among the first Americans ever to enter what came to be known as Yosemite Valley, described his experience on March 27, 1851 as follows:

> It has been said that 'it is not easy to describe in words the precise impressions which great objects make upon us.' I cannot describe how completely I realized this truth. None but those who have visited this most wonderful valley, can even imagine the feelings with which I looked upon the view that was there presented. The grandeur of the scene was but softened by the haze that hung over the valley – light as gossamer – and by the clouds which partially dimmed the higher cliffs and mountains. This obscurity of vision but increased the awe with which I beheld it, and as I looked, a peculiar exalted sensation seemed to fill my whole being, and I found my eyes in tears with emotion. (Bunnell, 1892 [1880], p. 54; Cf. Runte, 1990, p. 12)

Proponents of composition sought to convey the experience of the landscape, a form of representation argued as being no less valid. Thomas Moran, claimed, "I place no value upon literal transcripts from Nature. My general scope is not realistic; all my tendencies are toward idealization. Of course, all art must come through Nature: I do not mean to depreciate Nature or naturalism; but I believe that a place, as a place, has…value in itself for the artist only so far as it furnishes the material from which to construct a picture. Topography in art is valueless" (Sheldon, 1881, p. 125). Proponents of transcription called for as if unadulterated description or mirroring of nature. These proponents, such as King, eschewed the element of invention and favored scientific exactitude. Markedly, transcription for these proponents was not uninfluenced by symbolic depth principles – the achievement of scientific aims provided the organizing logic. The work of ornithologist John James Audubon and botanist Georg Dionysius Ehret may be seen as belonging to this camp, reflecting "accurately" the phenomena they represent.[10] As it concerns representations of landscape, the convention of plein-air studies supported detailed (and putatively "transcribed") renderings, and, as Asher Durand argued in his influential "Letters on

[10] As the scare quotes suggest, the question concerning representational accuracy is not followed by a simple or obvious answer. Take Audubon's and Ehret's illustrations, for example. As William Cronon argues, such scientific illustrations "inevitably reflect the science of their day, recording only those elements that contemporary theory defined as essential" (1992, pp. 45–50). While it is important not to overstate the case, the sensuous surfaces, while retaining their aesthetic autonomy, may be seen from another standpoint as being under the control of symbolic depth principles – namely, seen as reflecting the artists' preoccupation with taxonomic knowledge. Other issues concern the archetypal nature of such representations (which strip the observed subjects of their peculiar individual characteristics) as well as either the lack of environmental context or, by contrast, saturation with a specific environmental context that shapes how any given phenomenon is seen to be constituted. For a more general discussion of the role of values in science bearing on these concerns, see Malczewski (forthcoming).

Landscape Painting," meticulously represented nature with a high fidelity to detail was accorded great value (1855).

The tension between composition and transcription as legitimate approaches to depictions of landscape is illuminated in Richard Fine's discussion of Fitz Hugh Ludlow and Bierstadt's overland trip out West:

> The basic difference between these two friends rests within the general framework of the nineteenth-century conceptual dilemma concerning the nature of the real and the ideal, and the importance of both. After remarking on the first, grand sensation of landscape, Ludlow then relates in detail the various objects which compose the view. After being hit by 'Nature's lightning'…he recovers his perceptual and analytical facilities and relates that, 'Mathematicians have ascertained the width of the canyon between a mile and a half and five miles. Where we stood the width was about two.' He then surveys and describes in precise detail the entire canyon…In describing these scenes in detail, Ludlow is obviously manifesting a particular concern for the real…Bierstadt, on the other hand, like Frederick Church and [Thomas] Cole, works within the tradition of landscape as history. His large canvases indulge in the rhetoric of grandeur. (Fine, 1974, p. 96; Cf. Ludlow, 1870, p. 426)

The "rhetoric of grandeur" in Bierstadt's paintings appeared obvious (if in fact it was obvious) only to those who had visited the locations in question. Mark Twain, living in San Francisco at the time, was among those who had visited the Yosemite Valley and thus, commenting on Bierstadt's *Domes of the Yosemite*, wrote with the authority of direct experience that

> those snow peaks are correct – they look natural; the valley is correct and natural; the pine trees clinging to the bluff on the right, and the grove on the left, and the boulders, are all like nature…But when I got around to the atmosphere, I was obliged to say 'this man has imported this atmosphere from some foreign country, because nothing like it was ever seen in California'…It is more the atmosphere of Kingdom-Come than of California…I believe that this atmosphere of Mr. Bierstadt's is altogether too gorgeous. (Twain, 1867)

Bierstadt's "altogether too gorgeous" paintings depicting the natural landscape are not transcripts of nature, images shaped by scientific priorities. They are images shaped by the priorities of the artistic convention of composition. Composition – or the ideal – stood in for transcription – what was presumed to be "real."[11]

[11] Notably, Moran for his part created the exemplary images of the Grand Canyon (1873–1874) and Yellowstone (1872) that were among the first and certainly among the most well-known images of those places seen by most Americans of the 19th century.

Conductive Surface: Popular Exposure to Bierstadt's Art

In this section, I document evidence suggesting the extent to which representations of the natural landscape in Great Pictures may be said to have been resonant or efficacious in transmitting symbolic depth principles. I discuss the historical tracks testifying to the social reach of these representations to fill in the story of the manner in which these material objects were experienced as material symbols. In this way, the paintings' conductive surface is isolated, making clearer the extent to which the paintings were sociologically potent as vehicles of sensuous aesthetic qualities as well as conduits of symbolic depth.[12]

One indication of the popular influence of his work is Bierstadt's celebrity. Bierstadt and his paintings were part of a larger phenomenon of American celebrity artists and celebrated landscapes (Cf. Carr, 1980, p. 28). The era of this phenomenon may be bookended by Church's *Niagara* of 1857 and Bierstadt's *Last of the Buffalo* of 1888,[13] although the zenith was attained from 1863 until Moran's *Chasm of the Colorado* of 1873–1874. In 1869, the *American Phrenological Journal* reported the following: "Mr. Bierstadt's face is of that open, frank, 'pronounced' type which so characterizes his pictures" (23–24). This entry on Bierstadt was accompanied by a reproduction of his likeness, serving as an empirical specimen for amateur and specialist phrenologists alike. Although the configuration of Bierstadt's skull may be less significant to we who live in the 21st century than it was to his contemporaries, the role this entry plays as an index of the fame Bierstadt's paintings earned him remains noteworthy as a testament to the paintings' impact. Experience of Bierstadt's Great Pictures and composed landscapes was not limited to art critics, journalists, and the elite. Bierstadt's paintings were some of the most renowned popular images of the era. To wit, it was noted in the February 27,

[12] Although the discussion here focuses on the public's direct experience of Bierstadt's original works, it is important to note that his paintings were made widely available as reproductions. Bierstadt was known to have reproduced his work using various types of engraving (e.g., wood engraving, steel engraving, and chromolithography) and photomechanical processes (e.g., collotype, photoengraving, and photogravure). As Helena Wright (1990) demonstrates in her authoritative study, Bierstadt not only employed the latest technologies of the time to reproduce his artworks but also aggressively marketed them. The publication plan for *Rocky Mountains,* for instance, called for a limited edition of 750 prints of which 200 were artist proofs signed by Bierstadt and his engraver, James Smillie (Wright, 1990, p. 272; also see Sandweiss, 1992, p. 129). In this way, the conductive surface of Bierstadt's vision of nature reached a broad audience. The prints indeed were smaller than the originals – they were not "Great Prints" – although many were in color and had high fidelity to the originals. Sandweiss reports that "British print publisher Thomas McLean wanted to promote his chromolithographs of this painting [*Rocky Mountains*] and its companion piece, *Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mt. Rosalie*…[at] an exhibition…The chromolithographs, rather than the paintings, appear to have assumed center stage" (Sandweiss, 1992, p. 131). See Wright (1990) for exemplars of Bierstadt's prints and their dimensions.

[13] These two paintings may be found under the same roof in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Formerly, they were housed in the (now-closed) Corcoran Gallery of Art.

1864 edition of *Round Table* that "Mr. Bierstadt's name is now associated with the Rocky Mountains as is that of Mr. [Frederic] Church['s] with the Andes" (169; cited in Ferber, 1990, p. 194). Bierstadt's paintings, the tangible intermediaries through which much of the wide public came to first experience the wonders of the American West, had a social currency widely noted in historical documents.

Facts bearing on the demand for Bierstadt's work evidence the paintings' conductive efficacy. Upon the completion of *Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mt. Rosalie* in 1866, Bierstadt exhibited it at a month-long benefit for the Nursery and Children's Hospital, where he raised $2200 (Hendricks, 1974, pp. 158–160). This painting was then given a more popular stage. Bierstadt exhibited it in the gallery of New York's Tenth Street Studio. To mark the event, a banner was hung across the width of Broadway advertising the exhibition of the painting. In addition to this, Bierstadt charged admission to view the work. As Mayer and Myers note, the patrons of art were "the new class of businessmen…[coming] with their families to view paintings after a day of work" (1999, p. 57). Even the Congressman from Ohio, Rutherford B. Hayes (who, in February of 1878, as President of the United States, hosted Bierstadt at the White House), viewed the painting during its exhibition at the Tenth Street Studio, noting "It is very beautiful and wonderful. By gaslight the effect is incomprehensible, such brilliancy and light and shade! Mr. Bierstadt says it is better by daylight" (Hayes and Rutherford 1866; Anderson and Ferber, 1990, p. 222). Other facts evidence the reach of his work and its exposure to a wide public. The painting made a year-long tour of the United States (Brooklyn Museum, 2015), and in 1867 Bierstadt was received by Queen Victoria on the Isle of Wight, with *Storm in the Rocky Mountains* and *Rocky Mountains* in tow. When the latter was sold in 1865 it commanded $25,000, which was the highest price ever paid for a painting up to that point (Ferber, 1990, p. 26). *Storm in the Rocky Mountains* met with greater success: it later sold for $35,000 (Trump, 1963, p. 136).[14]

A technological development – the spreading use of gaslight – influenced the strength of the works' conductive surface. Careful illumination of Bierstadt's works may be seen as amplifying the intensity of the works' conductive surface insofar as it facilitated interactions with the paintings. In their discussion of 19th century artistic practices, Mayer and Myers claim

> Better control of lighting was possible because by the third quarter of the 19th century gas illumination was practical and widespread; period photographs of Bierstadt's studio at his home, Malkasten, show gas

[14] To offer a sense of the relative prices of these paintings, in 1863 the median taxable income of residents of New York City was just under $1000, and only 744 of New York's households earned over $20,000 – one of them, Cornelius Vanderbilt's, reported $680,728 in taxable income (Stelzner, 2013; Cf. 2015).

> fixtures, and it is known that Bierstadt sometimes painted at night by gaslight. The exhibition space at the Tenth Street Studio Building also had what was described as brilliant gaslight. It was reported in 1864 that the paintings on exhibit at the Metropolitan Fair for the U.S. Sanitary Commission were illuminated by 490 gas jets. (Mayer and Myers, 1999, p. 57)

Such use of light was novel and became the subject of critical attention. As Jarves noted, "pictures were generally hung without regard even to light" (1864, p. 346). This convention soon gave way, with Bierstadt as one of the more systematic and influential practitioners, to the employment of careful and often meticulous lighting. Bierstadt began to exhibit his paintings in darkened rooms with gas lamps carefully illuminating the featured painting in the manner of an actor on a theater stage. The paintings, besides, were often initially concealed behind a large curtain. When the curtain went up, the painting would be revealed to an audience primed for a spectacle. As Mayer and Myers write, "By the latter part of the 1860s, when he exhibited The Domes of the Yosemite (1867), Bierstadt seems to have left less to the whims of weather or chance. The lighting was described as very carefully controlled, and the point of view of the spectators was controlled as well by the construction of raised galleries" (1999, p. 56; Cf. *New York Post*, May 7, 1867). The ritual character of these practices provide strong evidence that Bierstadt's works were not merely disseminated cultural objects but that they were central material symbols around which collective life was organized. The element of light is thus seen here not in terms of the play of light manifest in a particular painting (normally the subject of technical as well as of aesthetic evaluation by art critics, which is a theme of analysis worthy in its own right) but rather in terms of the enhancement of the environment it offers for the experience of the material symbol.[15]

The telltale sign of the conductive surface of Bierstadt's work can be seen in reports from the Metropolitan Sanitary Fair of 1864. The Fair was held in New York's Union Square with the intent to raise funds to support the war-wounded, although fairs of this kind also had a civilizing and solidarity-building effect. Included in the Fair was an art gallery in which Bierstadt's *Rocky Mountains* was exhibited. In the same hall were Church's *Heart of the Andes* and Emanuel Leutze's 1851 *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, two other of a handful of the most influential and well-known works of the era (New York Metropolitan

[15] Bierstadt was not alone in lighting his work to advantage. As this excerpt from a 1864 review of Frederic Church's *Niagara* makes patent, the role of illumination was seen by one perceptive critic as imparting an effect of its own: "[*Niagara*] seems to have exhausted the artist's power, for it has had no successor. It holds its own bravely all these years – *although its color is not all it seemed to be when it was exhibited, and borrowed a grace or two from artificial light…*" (*New York Daily Tribune*, "The Exhibition of Pictures at the Metropolitan Fair," April 9, 1864: 12; my emphasis)

Fair, 1864a, p. 7; *New York Times,* April 11, 1864b). The gallery welcomed everyman to participate in the appreciation of the world of art and of landscapes of the American West. As the *New York Daily Tribune* reported:

> It cannot but be admitted by every man, who has at[t]entively studied what is going on in the world of art in our day, that we are in the midst of a great revolution; that 'The old order changeth, yielding place to new'; that truth and nature are, every day, calling the youth and genius of the world to their service, with voices of command that win a glad obedience; and that art, ever more and more, responds to the demand of humanity, for whose culture and education in all noble thoughts and purposes she alone exists, that she should feed it…with food fit for a race that dimly spies…its glorious future, and girds itself like a giant for the race…art is less and less the dainty and exclusive food of connoisseurs, and is striving to play her part as in the old time, but with a nobler and wider aim than then, in the education of the race. (*New York Daily Tribune*, "The Exhibition of Pictures at the Metropolitan Fair," April 9, 1864, p. 12)

New York's *The Evening Post* noted that the art gallery was one of the central attractions of the Fair (April 2, 1864, p. 1), a claim supported by the report in the *New York Daily Tribune* (April 9, 1864b, p. 1) of a charge of an additional 25 cents to enter the art gallery over the Fair's base admission price of one dollar.

Bierstadt's *Rocky Mountains* was given a prominent place in the art gallery. This act of sanctification testifies both to the burgeoning sacrality of Bierstadt's work and to the way this work and the Fair's art gallery served mutually to sacralize one another. This is an instance of sacred contagion (Durkheim 1960 [1912], pp. 318, and 427–464; 1995 [1912], pp. 224, and 303–329; Cf. Mellor, 1998; Norton, 2014, p. 165). The Fair, which served to connect the individual to the collectivity and to arouse feelings of solidarity among its participants and with the American war-wounded, appears to have had one foot in a rite and another in a collective recreation (Cf. Durkheim, 1995 [1912], pp. 380–387). The meeting of the sacred material symbol – Bierstadt's *Rocky Mountains* – with the Fair reinforced and amplified the sacrality of each element: each "contaminated" the other.

Acclaim for the art gallery led to renewed calls for the creation of a "permanent free Gallery of Art," one "Institution essential to a great civilized metropolis" (Tuckerman, 1867, p. 11). As Henry Tuckerman wrote:

> The surprise and delight exhibited by the thousands of all degrees, who visited the Picture Gallery of the Metropolitan Fair, has suggested to many, for the first time, and renewed in other minds more emphatically, the need, desirableness, and practicability of a permanent and free Gallery of Art in our cities. The third metropolis of the civilized world should not

> [sic] longer be without such a benign provision for and promoter of high civilization. (1867, p. 11)

The idea to create a gallery of art in New York was realized eventually in the creation of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Howe, 1913, pp. 90–93; Avery, 1994, p. 50). Today, visitors to the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York can stop by Gallery 760 and see Bierstadt, Church, and Leutze's paintings in one room as visitors to the Fair of 1864 once did. The sacred character of these works remains at its apex. The efficacy of *Rocky Mountains*' conductive surface contributed in a notable way to the creation of what has become this painting's home.

Conclusion

The era of the Great Picture did not last long. Thomas Moran's congressional commissions, *The Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone* (1872), and *The Chasm of the Colorado* (1873–1874), were the last two Great Pictures in the genre of American landscape to achieve notoriety on par with Bierstadt's and Church's most celebrated works. Although two of Bierstadt's paintings were later purchased by Congress (thus further institutionalizing and sacralizing his translations of the natural landscape), the fervid pitch with which his work was received in the 1860s was never matched. Both the element of great size and the subject matter of the expansive West began to lose favor with popular audiences and critics alike. The Great Pictures, as it were, became victims of their own success.[16] As Wilkins notes, by the 1890s Great Pictures had fallen out of fashion along with art on western themes. He writes:

[16] This development raises the question of the nature of *automatization* – the tendency of aesthetic properties or forms to become hackneyed or banal (thus losing their sensual resonance). The concept of automatization is a Russian Formalist term initially developed to shine light on, among other things, variations in appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of language. I translate the Russian term "oshchutimost" (ощутимость) as sensual resonance, although noticeability or perceptibility may be more common literal translations. Liah Greenfeld translates the term as palpability in her work exploring the sociologically significant bond or linkage between the symbolic and the material (1987, p. 46).

The question concerning the organizing principles underlying the decay of collectively resonant aesthetic forms is one that merits further examination. In the present case, one marks analytically the difference between the loss of favor with pictures of great size and the loss of favor with a type of subject matter. The variability with which automatization proceeds along these two dimensions (i.e. size and subject matter) is a general empirical question yet unexplored and not taken up here. Concerning how this question bears on literature and its sensually resonant aesthetic properties, Yury Tynyanov theorized:

(1) In relation to the automatized constructive principle an antithetical constructive principle is formed in a dialectical fashion; (2) its application is under way – the constructive principle searches for areas of easiest application; (3) it spreads to the widest possible mass of phenomena; (4) it

> This sea change in taste was conspicuously demonstrated by the rejection of Albert Bierstadt's latest (and final) Great Picture, *The Last of the Buffalo* [1888], for showing at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris… [One member of the selection jury (notably, made up of Americans)] admitted that the principal reason for the rejection, despite the painting's display at the current Paris Salon by reason of Bierstadt's privileges as a chevalier of the Legion of Honor, was its inordinate size…In addition, the jury had felt that its style did not truly represent…[one] that accurately reflected current American art. (Wilkins, 1998 [1966], p. 256; see also Anderson, 1992, pp. 18–19)

It is fair to claim that a central aspect of the sensuous surface of *The Last of the Buffalo*, its great size, impeded the social appreciation of and engagement with the painting's symbolic depth – the meaning of the near extinction of the American bison, the profound transformation of indigenous American ways of life, and the turning of a page in westward expansion. It is a remarkable coincidence that this painting suggests an apt metaphor: Bierstadt himself and the painting were indeed the last of the buffalo. With this work we mark the demise of the celebrity landscape artist and the convention of the Great Picture.

Bierstadt's contribution to American iconic nature extended beyond the visual, having an impact on other facets of society such as law and status. In the 1870s when Ulysses S. Grant signed the Yellowstone Act and voracious readers were consuming in great numbers narrative accounts of the American western frontier in books, newspapers, and regionally and nationally distributed magazines, the iconic images of Bierstadt's Rocky Mountains and Yosemite Valley were already in mind. Yellowstone was to be preserved from settlement and to play the role of a "pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people" (United States Code Title 16, Chapter 1, Subchapter 5, Sect. 21 1872). Unlike Kingdom-Come, this preserved nature required a mundane legal-governmental apparatus to maintain its nature as nature. The widespread popularity of John Muir's now canonical writings and the recognition of Muir as the great American interpreter of nature is better understood in light of the

becomes automatized and calls for antithetical principles of construction. During periods of decay of central dominant trends[,] dialectically new constructive principles appear. Large forms in the process of automatization accentuate the significance of small forms (and vice versa). (1929; quoted in Greenfeld 1987, p. 46)

The analytical value of this view for studying such diverse material symbols as art, music, and fashion is immediately apparent. It is said that there is a fine line between love and hate – and this certainly appears to be the case when fashion that initially stuns, for instance, transforms into something even the dead would not dare to be caught wearing. Jonathan Eastwood (2007, pp. 167–168) follows up on Liah Greenfeld's lead (1987) in making the case for the sociological significance of Russian Formalism in arguing against Pierre Bourdieu's view of Russian Formalist thought as bearing simply on properties internal to form. One suggestion offered by my evidence is that conductive surface – particularly when it is highly effective – may bear on the degree to which the "oshchutimost" or sensual resonance of the sensuous surface decays.

presence of iconic nature in mid-19th century American consciousness: Muir gave literary form to Bierstadt's visual touchstones prefiguring public appreciation of his work.[17] Muir wrote both as the geologist and as the aesthete, intertwining analytically grounded descriptions and claims with poetic interpretation (Cf. Muir, 1997; Worster, 2008). The two key tendencies of representation of the frontier – composition and transcription – are manifest in Muir's work. In this way, Muir's writings helped confirm the "truth" of images of iconic nature.

To sum up, shining light on material symbols via analysis of their aspects of symbolic depth, sensuous surface, and conductive surface aids in tracking and understanding processes of social order and differentiation by drawing attention to the autonomous contribution of the material form taken by concretized symbolic organizing principles as well as the characteristics of and role played by those principles. The value of this framework for the cultural sociological study of art lies in its ability both to grasp analytically the social power of artworks' aesthetic qualities and to tie it to a coherent general theoretical framework that locates this power genetically and causally and that illuminates social forms cutting across it. This framework helps answer the call for a more meaningful sociology of the arts (Eyerman, 2006) and also evidences Alexander Riley's claim that "one of the most compelling intersections between sociological thought and art to date" has developed out of the Durkheimian tradition (Riley, 2013, p. 5). The program for the study of material symbolism affirms Riley's contention that Durkheimian theory has much to say on the question "*How is art as a knowledge system related to religion and ultimately to deeper processes of social organization and the production of meaning?*" (2013, p. 7).

As the case above suggests, Great Pictures helped shape an iconic nature at a signal moment of social change in America by helping carve channels through which conceptions of the natural landscape would come to flow. Icons – as do totems and other material symbols – not only provide a tangible substance whose physical characteristics carry autonomous force bearing on aesthetic sensibility but also pass on society's organizing principles in ways that are concomitantly immediate *and* materially mediated. In this way, the program for the study of material symbols brings into clearer definition the manner in which and the extent to which aesthetic sensibility is bound up with the moral life of society.

Key to analyzing the power of material symbols is adopting the attitude that the social meanings they embody may not be subjectively adhered to in a rational sense by actors. Indeed, powerful material symbols – e.g., the female breast – may be subject to being reified as essences, to being taken for natural

[17] In point of fact, while Bierstadt's various representations of California's Sierra Nevadas and Yosemite Valley were at the height of their fame in the 1860s, young John Muir had not yet set foot in California. It was not until March 1868 that Muir disembarked a steamship in San Francisco and, shortly thereafter, made the pilgrimage to Yosemite.

signs of what an entity is as such (Cf. Alexander, 2012, pp. 26–27). As has been suggested elsewhere, nature in the sense of Latin *natura* or Greek *physis* is one material symbol subject to being essentialized (Cronon, 1996). On this view, the challenge posed by the iconic turn to Charles Peirce's argument (1955 [1940]) that an icon permits more direct communication than symbols (which he takes as being mediated) is clear: the power of an icon – howsoever it may be analytically decomposed – is empirically transmitted intertwined with symbolic principles. When we see Bierstadt's Rocky Mountains or Moran's Grand Canyon, we are also seeing a set of symbolic organizing principles (e.g., composition) informing mid-19th century art appreciation and, often, artistic intention.[18] From the view of material symbolism developed here, no causal relation is claimed to exist between an object's surface and that object's depth qualities – only relations of conditionality, potential, or complementarity. One may entertain the argument that certain material objects may lend themselves to certain types of meaning, but, given the present state of knowledge, this remains an open question.

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[18] See quotation from Thomas Moran above (cited in Sheldon, 1881, p. 125). In this way, biography meets history.

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