

# Winslow Homer (1836-1910): Poet of the Sea

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*Dulwich Picture Gallery, London: until May 21, 2006*  
*Musée d'Art Américain Giverny, France: June 18 to September 24, 2006*

The Dulwich Gallery is to be congratulated for bringing America's greatest nineteenth century realist artist to an audience in Europe probably unaware of his existence.

The exhibition provides a rare opportunity to see the works of Winslow Homer, an artist who possessed an extraordinary ability to capture the fleeting moment in his paintings and turn it into something unforgettable. Homer also expressed a deep sympathy for ordinary people—the Union soldier, the African-American cotton picker or the English fisherwomen—who were generally ignored, sentimentalised or patronised by his contemporaries.

Winslow Homer was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1836 to an unsuccessful businessman father and an artistically inclined mother. The dominant art of the period expressed in the Hudson River School (1835-1870) turned to the pure and untouched American wilderness to develop a new artistic identity in the young republic. A national art was demanded that could compensate for the lack of history or the traditions of classical Greece and Rome.

At the age of 19, Homer became an apprentice in a print-making company, and in 1859, he moved to New York to work as a freelance illustrator. To overcome the limitations of engravings, Homer developed techniques of engraving—simple forms, beautifully proportioned figure compositions with dramatic contrasts of light and shade—that were to underpin the rest of his artistic life.

Although Homer attended art classes, he was largely self-taught, experimenting with the rules laid down by art theorists such as Michel Chevreul, whose “Laws on the Contrasts of Colour” Homer regarded as “my Bible.”

During the American Civil War (1861-1865), the magazine *Harper's Weekly* sent Homer to cover the fighting as an illustrator. Unfortunately, none of Homer's war paintings or his subsequent social commentary works are in the exhibition, and this is a major drawback to an understanding of the artist and his time (but more on that later).

The years after the Civil War reveal an artistic shift from wilderness subjects to more pastoral and comfortable landscapes where the subjects are more introspective and poetic. Homer produced a few seascapes in oil such as *Beach Scene* (1869), which shows rather crudely painted young boys and girls frolicking in the waves. In 1873, Homer took up the genre in earnest when he started painting watercolours, a medium considered second-class and amateurish. The exhibition shows

how well and quickly he was able to paint in that medium. There are idyllic depictions of warm summer days at the beach and on the farm. Young children are playing and bourgeois ladies promenade along the sea front. The sea is not presented as the threatening force of nature it later became in his paintings.

In *Three Boys on the Shore* (1873), Homer contrasts the patches of red in the setting sky and on the foreground rocks with the dark blue of the sea broken by the wonderfully drawn boys in their straw hats and crumpled clothing. *Moonlight* (1874) is an atmospheric and intimate rendition of two lovers in which Homer successfully surmounts the difficult task of painting two closely related colours—grey and brown.

In 1881, Homer left for England and ended up staying for 20 months in the northeastern fishing village of Cullercoates. The village and its gaily dressed girls had been popular with artists since 1820, but by the time Homer arrived, the surrounding suburbs had encroached on it, the world economy was in the midst of the Great Depression, and within a few years the small local fishing boats had given way to large steam trawlers.

Nevertheless, Homer captures that fast-disappearing world with a series of charcoal drawings and watercolours that capture beautifully the stoicism of the fisherwomen and girls waiting for their menfolk to return from the dangers of the stormy seas. Such a study is depicted in *Fisher Girls on Shore, Tynemouth* (1884). Another study from this period (though not in the exhibition), *Mending the Nets* (1881), is amongst Homer's best-known watercolours.

With these works, Homer appears to have overcome what his critics called his lack of finish and sketchiness, and he returned to New York. But within two years, he had left the city and moved to a studio on the isolated and windswept coastline of Prout's Neck, Maine, where he remained until he died.

The powerful forces of nature come to dominate his oil paintings. In *Life Line* (1884), a rescue line stretches from the cliffs on the right of the picture across the picture to a ship just visible on the left-hand side. In the centre, a pulley holds a man suspended below holding a drowned young woman. Her red shawl blows across his face, obscuring it completely. His right foot dips into the water. It seems as if the waves crashing around them might swallow them up at any moment. Homer continues with the struggle between man and nature in *The Lookout—“All's Well”* (1896) and *Kissing the Moon* (1904).

At Prout's Neck, Homer started to produce oil paintings with increasingly brooding seascapes devoid of human beings. Whilst he invested all his unconscious efforts into his oil paintings, he continued to produce the “goods” necessary for survival—his

watercolours. In contrast to his storm-focused oils, Homer's watercolours painted during his trips to the Caribbean and Adirondacks are far less violent. They experiment with Japanese techniques of splashing and broken washes and include scenes of fishing and canoeing, sponge divers and sailing boats. Homer is able to combine many strong and vibrant colours to capture the luminosity of the Tropics and the calmness of the mountains. Typical of the period are *Boy Fishing* (1892) and *Key West* (1903).

During the last decade of his life, he painted less and less frequently, and in the last five years leading up to his death in 1910, only in oils.

Few records of Homer's life remain apart from his artworks. When asked for material for a biography, Homer replied, "But I think that it would probably kill me to have such [a] thing appear, and, as the most interesting part of my life is of no concern to the public, I must decline to give you any particulars in regard to it."

As indicated earlier, an exhibition devoted to Homer's maritime pictures gives a one-sided understanding of the artist. Visitors will probably come away from the gallery unaware that Homer was regarded as a renegade by critics or that many of his subjects were regarded as unsuitable. Only *Searchlight on Harbour Entrance, Santiago de Cuba* (1901) hints at the more complex questions Homer dealt with. With just a cannon in the foreground atop old fortifications and the light beam from a spotlight, Homer subtly points to the blockade of the Spanish fleet during the Spanish War in 1898.

It was through his depictions of the American Civil War that Homer made his name. In 1866, *Prisoners from the Front* was exhibited at the National Academy of Design and the next year in Paris, France. In the extraordinarily richly painted *Home Sweet Home* (circa 1863), the sky and background resemble a classical landscape with its cloudy blue colouration and small groups of figures. On closer inspection, one of these turns out to be a brass band playing—the popular "Home Sweet Home" tune of the title? In contrast, the foreground is divided off by the light brown of a hanging cloth which merges into the darker browns of the tents and earth—the whole scene seeming to embrace in a protective sort of way two soldiers in blue uniforms. They are captured in a beautifully executed pose listening to the music. Their thoughts are of distant homes. But Homer subtly subverts that idea. They gaze down on what has now become their home: The kitbags outside a small low tent with a single boot sticking out from the dark interior. A metal pot steams away on glowing embers. Two hard biscuits lie on a metal plate.

Homer expressed the new and impersonal nature of the war in many of his engravings and paintings making use of the symbol of the sniper (*The Sharpshooter on Picket Duty*, 1863) With their ability to kill unseen from a distant with mass-produced weapons, Homer explained how "I looked through one of their rifles once.... The impression struck me as being near murder as anything I could think of in connection with the army and I always had a horror of that branch of the service."

This is not to say that Homer did not realise the liberating and democratic potential of the Civil War. In *Near Andersonville* or *Captured Liberators* (1865-1866), an African-American slave stands at her door looking forlornly as her prospective liberators

are led away by Confederate troops to Andersonville prison camp where thousands died from ill treatment, hunger and disease. Between her and the troops hang some gourds—a reference to the shape of the Big Dipper star constellation that runaway slaves were told to follow to freedom, as expressed in the popular song "Follow the Drinking Gourd":

*The riverbank makes a very good road  
The dead trees show you the way  
Left foot, peg foot, travelling on  
Follow the drinking gourd.  
When the sun comes back and the first quail calls  
Follow the drinking gourd  
For the old man is waiting to carry you to freedom  
If you follow the drinking gourd.*

Other paintings by Homer in the late 1860s and 1870s dealt with the problems of black emancipation as well as other social issues. One series dealt with the subject of adolescence and the transition into adulthood. *Weaning the Calf* (1875), ostensibly showing a calf being separated from its mother, also operates on deeper levels. Though the two well-dressed white boys in the bright sunlight contrast with the older black boy in his tatters, all three are linked together in weaning the calf. A fence separates them from motherhood (which Homer represents here as elsewhere with haystacks), and they are drawn towards the father in the background leading away the adult cow.

The dulling of the sense of optimism after the Civil War and the dimmed hopes of building a bright new democratic future were reflected in artists turning away from social commentary. The struggle against slavery waged by Lincoln and the North inevitably had limits. In the long run, the democratic ideals that underlay the Emancipation Proclamation could not be realised on the basis of a society dominated by class exploitation. The rise of monopoly capitalism in the aftermath of the Civil War created new and more profound social contradictions and raised social inequality to a qualitatively new level.

These difficult social questions were no doubt an important factor in Homer's growing concentration on seascapes, but the latter need not be seen simply as an expression of a loss of faith in humanity as some commentators have suggested. It opened up new artistic areas, allowing Homer to experiment with the complex task of producing compositions involving two blocks of colour (sea and sky) and with techniques of abstraction. For him, the sea represented "a perfect medium for the abstract all-over look...[and] seems to release us into the unconscious and becomes itself emblematic of the dynamics of that unconscious." Homer regarded *West Point, Prout's Neck* (1900) as his best painting up to that time.

Many of Winslow Homer's paintings can be seen on [http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/by\\_artist.php?id=91&msg=new](http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/by_artist.php?id=91&msg=new).



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