

Winslow Homer: *Crosscurrents*—Exhibition of the great 19th century American painter at the Metropolitan Museum

Clare Hurley
12 July 2022

Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents, an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, April 11 to July 31, 2022.

All artwork in the exhibition can be viewed here.

American painter Winslow Homer (1836–1910) has long been known for his dramatic seascapes of the rocky Maine coast, as well as his paintings of Civil War scenes. His oil paintings and watercolors such as *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)* (1876) of boys setting out to sea in a small sloop or children playing *Snap the Whip* (1872) communicate something of the optimism of the post-Civil War period when America was a rising power and there was a general sense of progress, of growth, and hopes that the democratic promise of the Civil War would be realized.

Organized around *The Gulf Stream* (1899), Homer’s powerful painting of a lone black man adrift on a stormy sea beset with sharks, the aptly titled exhibition *Crosscurrents* at the Metropolitan Museum in New York underscores the centrality of racial and class relations during and in the aftermath of the Civil War in Homer’s work.

Likewise the impact of developing industrial capitalism on rural and maritime life is evident when his images of American rural life in the 1870s-80s are carefully examined. His stunning watercolors of the West Indies indicate not just natural beauty, but the exploitation of this tropical “paradise” first by European colonial masters and then by US imperialism. Finally, his most persistent theme, the human struggle with the forces of nature, is at once existential but also grounded in a particular time and place.

To the extent that direct observation of the everyday was the basis of his work, Homer’s images seem straightforward. “Barbarously simple,” to the mind of contemporary and fellow Bostonian, writer Henry James. “He (Homer) has chosen the least pictorial features of the least pictorial range of scenery and civilization as if they were every inch as good as Capri or Tangier; and, to reward his audacity, he has incontestably succeeded.”

But Homer’s images, whether “pictorial” by James’ standards or not, were carefully composed to suggest narratives that are more ambiguous than they first appear; and though largely self-taught, he was not an unsophisticated provincial. Through his associations with fellow artists in New York City, where he lived and maintained a studio from the early 1860s till he relocated to the coast of Maine in the 1880s, and particularly his travel on two significant occasions—the first to Paris, France, in 1867 and the second to the English coastal village of Cullercoats for two years (1881–1882)—his work was deeply informed by that of the best European painters, such as his forerunner in dramatic seascapes, English Romantic painter J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) and the Realist Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), with whom his unvarnished pictures of rural labor share a particular affinity.

The organization of the exhibition draws connections between what otherwise might seem like discrete bodies of Homer’s work, centering it

in the historic developments of the Civil War and post-war Reconstruction period. It opens with *The Sharpshooter* (1863), a small canvas showing a single Union soldier perched up in a tree. At first it is hard to even distinguish the soldier from the tree branches, were it not for the telling detail of the red badge on his cap and the highlight on his ear and visor. Once noticed, however, the imminently bloody consequences of his focus are chilling. At a later time, Homer described his experience—and made a sketch of—looking through one such sharp-shooter’s scope as the closest thing he could imagine to murder.

In *Defiance, Inviting a Shot before Petersburg* (1864), a larger painting which effectively serves as a counterpart, we see what the soldier might have been aiming at—a Confederate soldier dances atop a trench before a decimated field inviting Union fire with a doomed bravado. A supporter of the Union and the abolition of slavery, Homer nonetheless saw the war as an internecine conflict that left deep scars on both sides. On at least two occasions he sketched behind Confederate lines, and the aforementioned scene in Petersburg might have been witnessed on one such.

Homer’s direct experience of the war came through his assignment by *Harper’s Weekly* to sketch camp life of Union troops under Major General George B. McClellan in 1861. At the age of 25, he already made his living producing wood-block illustrations for the popular press. The second son in a Boston mercantile family of fluctuating means, Homer had been apprenticed as a teenager to John Henry Bufford, a prominent Boston printer in whose shop he mastered the relatively new and labor-intensive process of lithography.

Introduced to the United States by Louis Prang in 1825, lithography, literally stone (litho) drawing (graphy), was a means of reproducing images in print media. Many political cartoons, like those of French satirist Honoré Daumier (1808-1890) were lithographs. But much of the work at Bufford’s was the more mundane production of handbills and advertisements. Homer left the sweatshop-like conditions of the litho shop by his early 20s in favor of work in wood-engraving for *Harper’s*. While never a cartoonist of the stature of Daumier, Homer’s illustrations often carry a pointed, if understated irony. And his strength as a draftsman, as well as his narrative compositions owed an enduring debt to this training. Even after becoming established as an artist, he would continue to earn a part of his living as an illustrator well into his career.

Painted upon his return to his New York studio, likely from sketches made on the scene, *Prisoners from the Front* (1866) established Homer’s artistic reputation as a painter, not a mere illustrator. Featured at the annual exhibition of New York’s National Academy of Design, it was shown to further critical acclaim at the 1867 Exposition Universelle in Paris, which Homer visited on his trip of that year.

The painting captures both the commonality—all of the figures are the same height and occupy the same picture plane—as well as the divide

between the North and South. The capturing Union officer, Brigadier General Francis Channing Barlow on the right may be the victor, but the cocky Confederate officer is the center of the composition. The other prisoners, one aged and the others in ragged clothes that hardly count as uniforms, clearly indicate the social divisions between the Southern planter class and the farmers and woodsmen of the hill country that made up the bulk of the Confederate troops. All of them look poor in comparison to Barlow with his glossy boots and sword; even the Confederate officer, for all his swagger, has buttons missing from his jacket and breeches.

Through such seemingly minor details, Homer's pictures invite the viewer to ask questions, but only suggest answers. In *The Veteran in a New Field* and *The Brush Harrow* (both 1865) in the tradition of countless paintings of agricultural life from Breughel down to Millet, the images suggest humanity's place in the earth's seasonal cycles. But on further examination, the human toll of the recent conflict is encapsulated in the images of a solitary man harvesting with a scythe suggestive of the Grim Reaper and two children at work with a primitive tool in fields without adult assistance.

Homer was one of the few visual artists of his time to observantly and sympathetically portray formerly enslaved African Americans in paintings that pose questions about the newly established social relations immediately after the Civil War. In *Near Andersonville* (1865-66) and *A Visit from the Old Mistress* (1876), these questions are posed sharply. Two other stunningly beautiful paintings, *The Cotton Pickers* (1876) and *Dressing for the Carnival* (1877) depict aspects of African-American life as it was being established during the period of Reconstruction (1867-1877).

Also in the 1870s, Homer began to spend summers in Gloucester, Massachusetts, a New England fishing community where everyone, including children, was involved in hauling their daily livelihood from the sea. It was there he first began painting in watercolors, a medium that did not then have the stature of oil, being associated with amateurs, mostly women. But it was perfectly suited to capturing the crystalline light of Cape Ann, and Homer's mastery of the medium gave it tremendous expressive power. More rapidly produced than oil paintings, Homer was also able to earn a better living, consigning more than a hundred watercolors to his gallery for sale one season.

Even here however, the picturesque in Homer is grounded in specific events. *Waiting for Dad (Longing)* (1873), for example, might seem to be a sentimental image, till one learns that a particularly devastating Nor-easter had drowned a good portion of the male population at sea that year, leaving many households without fathers, and families without their main breadwinners.

The power of the sea, and our relation to it, would become an increasingly dominant theme of Homer's work by the 1880s. In 1881, he made his second trip to Europe, this time staying almost two years in Cullercoats, a northern English coastal village with a fishing economy much like Gloucester. There he painted primarily the fishwives he observed—their husbands being likely at work out at sea—standing tenaciously against the forces of nature in *Perils of the Sea* (1881) *Inside the Bar* (1883), and *The Gale* (1883-1893).

He also witnessed, and painted, several extraordinary rescues from sinking vessels. *The Life Line* (1884) in particular is exceptional not only for the power of its composition—the nearly drowned woman and her rescuer hang suspended in the center of the composition of crashing waves—but it demonstrated the use of a new technology, the breech buoy, which made such hazardous rescues possible. The importance of technology in mastering the forces of nature is also apparent in *Eight Bells* (1886) as two fishermen use a sextant and chronometer to determine their ship's position in rough seas.

Homer examined the same fundamental relationships between human

labor and the forces of the sea in the very different environment of the tropics in the watercolors he painted on his two stays in the Caribbean in 1885 and in 1898. Partly commissioned by *The Century Magazine* to advertise the natural beauty of the islands as tourist destinations for well-to-do Northerners, Homer's dazzling watercolors again show a social as much as a natural environment. Here young black fishermen haul turtle and sponges from the iridescent waves, instead of herring and halibut, but the hazards of earning a living in such a way were much the same, though different in critical respects.

The watercolors *Rest* and *A Garden in Nassau* (both 1885) are powerful images of exclusion and inequality. A young black woman resting her burden of fruits and a black child respectively stand outside high stucco walls behind which all that we, like they, can see are verdant palms and vibrant flowers suggesting that a tropical "paradise" for some was based on the distinctly un-paradisical disenfranchisement and exploitation of the labor of others.

Homer's characteristically blunt depiction of a carefully observed social reality is implicitly critical. His approach had much in common with, and was likely informed, by that of Courbet, a generation older than Homer, whose Realist manifesto proclaimed:

'To be able to translate the customs, ideas, the appearances of my epoch according to my own appreciation of it [to be not only a painter but a man.] in a word to create living art, that is my goal.' ("On Realism," 1855.)

There are similarities between the two painters, not only in approach but in their attention to class relations and rural labor in a period of social and political transition. Each lived through titanic events—Courbet, the 1848 revolution and the Paris Commune of 1871; Homer, the Civil War and the rise of American industrial society. Each adopted an uncompromising realism. It is difficult not to see the influence of Courbet and others in a work like Homer's *Prisoners from the Front*.

At the same time, there are considerable dissimilarities, rooted, above all, in differing social conditions. The social struggle in France in the mid-19th century was at a considerably more advanced state. French workers revolted in 1830 and rose up as independent force in June 1848, at a time when the American Civil War, which would usher in a period of explosive economic development and growth of the working class, was only being prepared.

The differences find expression, for example, in the depiction of rural labor in Courbet's *The Stone Breakers* (1849), as opposed to Homer's *Old Mill (The Morning Bell)* (1871). Nor did the explosive struggles of the working class in America of the 1880s and later ever become Homer's subject. He had matured and found his social-artistic orientation in a different era in a different context.

Nevertheless, Homer's final paintings of the surf pounding the rocks in Prout's Neck, Maine, such as *Northeaster* (1895) or *Driftwood* (1909), for all that they convey the restless movement of water, are surprisingly rooted in concrete actuality. With Homer's characteristically keen powers of observation, they are informed by his understanding that human beings, through their labor, are inexorably engaged in unrelenting struggle with this tumult and clash of elements.

(*Winslow Homer: American Passage* by William R. Cross, published 2022, has served as a reference for this review.)



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact