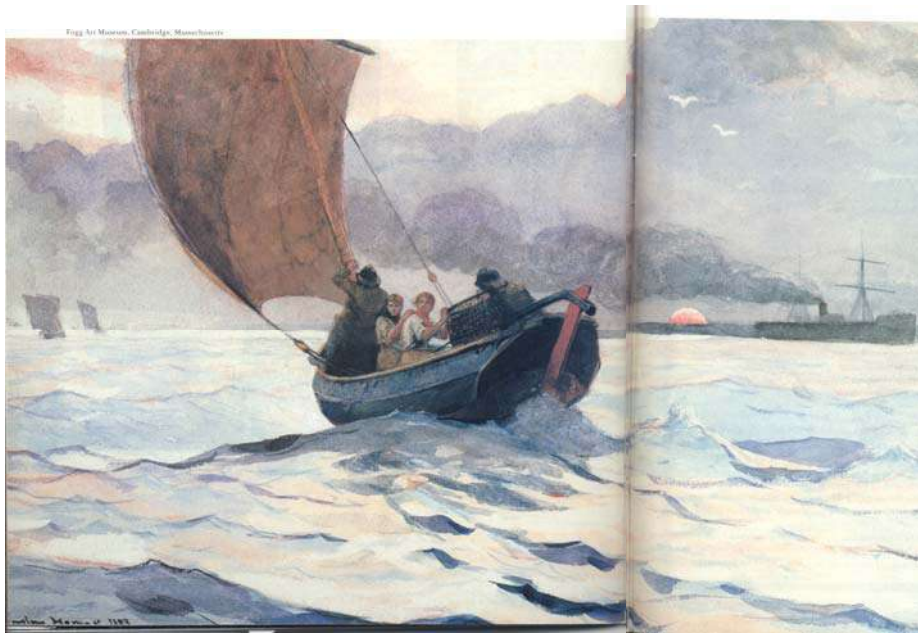


Winslow Homer, the quintessential American artist

He would chronicle it all--the Civil War, the schoolyard games, the raging coast of Maine-- yet the man remained a mystery to the end.

By Ken Chowder
Smithsonian, October, 1995



Returning Fishing Boats, (1883); Winslow Homer is “both the historian and the poet of the sea...” wrote one critic.

Something must have happened to Winslow Homer around the end of the 1870s. In his mid-40s, he was already a successful painter--eventually, he would be widely regarded as the greatest American artist of the 19th century. The early Homer welcomed critics into his Manhattan studio. He had an active social life; one young woman, who often saw him at picnics, said that "he liked to be in the thick of things." He conducted "the usual number of love affairs," as a friend said. Homer was a bit of a dandy: he wore loud checks and bowler hats and sported a huge handlebar mustache. He was affable and funny; another friend wrote, "I have enjoyed Homer's visit exceedingly. ...I have not laughed so much since I left home."

It was in 1879 that reporters began to notice something different about Winslow Homer. The first thing they remarked was a certain need for privacy. "Of Mr. Winslow Homer's movements,...no person however intimate is ever supposed to have the secret," one magazine wrote. The next year, Homer began to be impolite, even brusque; he was particularly hostile, some said, toward women. "He affects eccentricities of manner that border upon gross rudeness," a reporter wrote. A few years earlier, when he spent a summer in Gloucester, Massachusetts, he'd lived right in the center of town; in 1880 he stayed at the lighthouse in the middle of Gloucester Harbor instead, rowing into town only when he needed supplies.

The next year he left for England; he stayed in an isolated fishing village on the ocean, in complete seclusion, for nearly two years. When he came back to America, he settled down outside the tiny town of Prout's Neck, Maine, on a rocky peninsula surrounded by the stormy sea. He would live there for 27 years--the rest of his life--unmarried, with no more of "the usual" love affairs. His two-room cottage, a converted stable, was heated by a single stove ("Mop frozen stiff in other room," he wrote one January); he indulged in neither telephone nor horse-drawn carriage. In the winter there were no neighbors at all, and this suited him. "I like my home more than ever as people thin out," he wrote. The later Homer discouraged visitors and was disinclined even to hear from the outside world: "I am four miles from telegram & P.O. & under a snow bank most of the time, so I cannot answer telegrams." His hermit's manners toward strangers ensured solitude. To dishearten lady visitors, he posted a sign on the path to his studio: "SNAKES! MICE!"

"I don't want a lot of people nosing around my studio and bothering me," he wrote. "I don't want to see them at all." Winslow Homer had withdrawn. We don't really know why he withdrew; Homer didn't want us to know. Late in life he was approached by an art critic who

wanted to write Homer's biography. "It would probably kill me to have such a thing appear," Homer wrote back. "As the most interesting part of my life is of no concern to the public I must decline." Even now, no one is certain what this "most interesting part of his life" really was, but we can guess.

And we can see for certain how his paintings, like his life itself, went through a drastic transformation. A new Homer retrospective opens at the National Gallery of Art (sponsored by GTE Corporation) on October 15, continuing until January 28, 1996; the exhibition then moves to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (February 21 to May 26, 1996) and to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (June 20 to September 22, 1996). Despite Winslow Homer's own injunction--"Don't let the public poke its nose into my picture"--the exhibition, with the accompanying catalog published by the National Gallery of Art, will clearly show the evolution of a great painter's work: from a vision of a sunny, cheerful America to a lonely universe of elemental conflict, isolation, danger and death.

Winslow Homer was a Yankee. He was born in Boston in February 1836. His mother was a painter, a talented amateur who did pretty watercolors of flowers. His father, a well-to-do hardware merchant, jumped into the California gold rush of 1849; Charles Homer loaded a ship with mining machinery, packed his shining brass-bound trunks, and came back two year& later with...a small parcel fastened only with string. With the family fortune gone, Winslow, at 19, became apprenticed to a lithographer. He designed cover illustrations for popular songs--songs like "Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad." He hated it. "From the time I took my nose off that lithographic stone, I have had no master; and never shall have any," he later said. When his apprenticeship was over, he became a freelance illustrator, and his first published drawing appeared when he was 21, in a magazine called *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*.

The Civil War made Winslow Homer famous. *Harper's Weekly* sent him to draw the war in 1861, and he followed McClellan in Virginia. He returned to the war at least once, observing Grant's successful, if bloody, Peninsular Campaign in 1862. In the meantime, he began to paint. Winslow Homer, as much as any artist, can be said to be self-taught: he took a grand total of four lessons in oil painting, but even his first works show a surprising mastery. Homer himself was not so surprised. As an apprentice, looking at a gallery, he'd announced to friends his intention to paint. What kind of work would he do? "Something like that," Homer said, indicating the pictures in the window, "only a damned sight better." He was quite right; his professional debut as a painter, in 1863, was a complete success. Though he would often receive scathing reviews (it took years for sales to make him financially secure) there was never any doubt that Winslow Homer was an important artist.

The first paintings are all nominally pictures of war. But Homer seldom showed men actually fighting. Instead, his Civil War images were of life in camp, at the edge of war--soldiers smoking and whittling, eating pie, foraging for food, feigning illness, watching the campfire, sleeping in the sun or listening to a military band play "Home, Sweet Home." His soldiers show boredom and sadness more than courage or fear. Homer repudiated the usual heroic battle scenes in favor of small moments, carefully and truly rendered. Death, for the time being, is still offstage.

The fierce independence that marked Homer's character is evident in Napoleon Saronv's portrait of him. c. 1880.



Three Southern prisoners are brought up before a Northern officer in *Prisoners from the Front* (1866), hailed by the *New York Evening Post* as a complete "summation of the most vital facts of the Civil War."



Homer didn't paint his best-known Civil War picture until the war was over. *Prisoners from the Front* (above) shows a Union officer (Gen. Francis Barlow) reviewing a group of Confederate prisoners. From the moment the picture was exhibited in 1866, it has been seen as a summary of the entire war. A cool, steady, rigid Yankee faces three Southerners: a slouching and seemingly ignorant boy, a bewildered old man whose past has been defeated by the present, and a defiant, romantic officer with flowing hair. The painting is little more than a line-up of men standing on a wasteland of destroyed tree stumps, but Homer's broad historical vision is clear: making no judgments, he contrasts two ways of life.



***The Carnival*, painted in 1877, is one of a series in which Homer documented the lives of the newly freed blacks in Petersburg, Virginia. Strips of cloth on the Harlequin costume derive from African ceremonial dress. (Metropolitan Museum of Art)**

The painting was an immediate sensation. Homer would paint for 43 more years, but *Prisoners from the Front* was always, in his day, considered his greatest painting. It was mentioned so frequently--often to disparage later work--that Homer eventually remarked, "I'm sick of hearing about that picture. "

Just after the war, Homer painted *The Veteran in a New Field*. The image is simple: a man stands in a sunny field, scything tall wheat, his back to us. The veteran has dropped his uniform coat and canteen, abandoning his military role to return to a harvest of plenty. The "new field" the veteran has taken up is the business of peace. But the simple picture can be read in another way. The scythe is a potent symbol: the veteran, once a killer, is the Grim Reaper, Death himself. As Bret Hart had written in 1861, "Death shall reap the braver harvest! " The painting, then, is an elegy for the dead. The war is over, but its legacy remains--the presence of absence. This, Homer seems to say, is what we have harvested.

In December 1866 Homer traveled to Europe and spent some ten months in Paris. He enjoyed the night life hugely, but he was not greatly influenced by the work he saw in France. He was never, in fact, greatly influenced by anyone else's work. Even as a young apprentice, he'd formulated a declaration of independence: "If a man wants to be an artist," Winslow Homer pronounced, "he should never look at pictures."

So Homer's paintings from the late 1860s and '70s are not particularly European. In fact, these works, taken together, form a meticulous picture of America--almost a social history of the nation. The early Homer was a thoroughly democratic artist. He captured the flavor of American life by painting ordinary people at familiar moments. His was a sun-blessed, congenial America. Most often, he painted subjects frequently ignored by his peers--children and women and African-Americans.

His children were almost always of the country variety. Homer lived in New York City, but he usually painted rural, outdoor scenes, as if this America, away from the cities, was the real one. Perhaps he shared the national longing for the age of innocence, before blood was shed in the Civil War, when America was still sweetly rural, untainted by industrialization and urbanization. The string of barefoot boys

playing snap the whip (below) outside the red country schoolhouse in Homer's painting from 1872 could, like many of his pictures, have been an illustration for Mark Twain's nostalgic *Tom Sawyer*, written only a few years later.

Inside that schoolhouse there was a new institution: the woman teacher. When the men went off to fight the Civil War, women captured the American classroom and never gave it back. Teaching was just one of the new pursuits for women. Homer's women worked in factories, rode (if sidesaddle) through high mountains and even showed their knees as they wrung out bathing costumes on the beach. It isn't always easy to see emancipation in activities that now seem staid, but even an occupation like croquet reflected a new kind of woman. Croquet was a game that women, despite their gentility and cumbersome hoop skirts, could play against men--and sometimes win. In the *Croquet Scene* of 1866, the female players are monumentally large, and their outfits blaze with color; the one faceless man in a black jacket is on his knees before these new emblems of womanhood. In *The Dinner Horn*, painted in 1870, a young woman with one sturdy arm on her hip literally sounds the trumpet--the trumpet, perhaps, of change.



***Snap the Whip* (1872) captures the jubilation of boys just freed from the confines of the schoolhouse (background). With nine main figures, the canvas is one of Homer's most ambitious early compositions.**

The growing independence of women was one of America's accomplishments featured in Homer's paintings. The newly acquired position of blacks was another. Throughout his career, Homer used African-Americans as subjects; in fact, the *New York Times* reported in 1880 that no other American painter, white or black, painted black people so often. On a few early occasions, Homer did resort to the condescending caricature that prevailed at the time, depicting blacks as banjo-strumming, minstrel-show figures. But far more often, he portrayed them with sympathy and emotional depth. *The Carnival (Dressing/or the Carnival)*, from 1877, is a masterpiece of color, character and social history. It depicts a moment when two black women are dressing a pensive black man in a bright Harlequin's outfit for the end-of-year celebration called Jonkonnu. Small children, two of them holding American flags, watch in the sunshine. But the celebration, like the man's face, is not a very joyful one. The national election of 1876 had signaled the end of Reconstruction. Even as Homer painted, the Southern black was facing the slide back to conditions much like slavery. In the carnival of Jonkonnu, the black man will be permitted to ascend to the big house and beg his old masters for coins: he is a sad clown. The gate leading to the mansion has again been shut. But, as Peter Wood and Karen Dalton write in *Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks*, the artist has "chosen to locate himself and the viewer on the black side of the fence."

The early Homer painted a broad picture of American society. No one knows what changed his attitude toward people and his vision of the world. Nicolai Cikovsky, cocurator of the exhibition with Franklin Kelly, attributes the change, in part, to a growing distaste for American values in a time of political corruption and venal money-lust. But there are other guesses to be made. It seems clear that the later Winslow Homer, the painter of elemental struggle between Man and Nature, was born of some mysterious pain. Several scholars have pointed out that one woman in particular, a young woman with reddish hair, appears frequently in the watercolors beginning in 1875--then disappears forever in 1879, the year Homer's behavior changed. In the new exhibition, this woman is a petulant schoolteacher in *Blackboard*, lies in the grass reading in *The New Novel* and is the figure in *Woman Peeling a Lemon*. "In later years, writes Lloyd Goodrich, the first notable Homer scholar, "there was one painting that he always kept on an easel in his studio"--a small image of the woman. According to family legend, this was the love of his life.

She disappeared from his paintings; he spent the summer of 1880 in the lighthouse; and then in 1881 he left for the bleak fishing village of Cullercoats in the north of England. There he found the subject that would occupy him for the rest of his life: the raging sea. In England he painted monumental women by a sunless ocean--powerful women carrying baskets of mussels, mending their nets, watching ships in distress. The heroic quality that Homer removed from the Civil War shows up in these fishwives. But women, who had been so admired and so prominent, would gradually disappear from his work. The situation of men in peril on the sea would not. There had been some kind of shipwreck in Winslow Homer's life.

What happens after a shipwreck? With luck, rescue. Homer returned to America; in 1883, he moved to Prout's Neck, where his brothers each had a house. The next year he took over his brother Charles' stable and had it moved to the edge of the sea; he added a covered porch so he could sit outside and watch the ocean. That same year he finished his large and dramatic oil *The Life Line*. As Homer went on, he often deleted details to heighten the essential meaning. In this painting, we see the edge of a ship to the left and some small figures on a cliff to the right; but most of the canvas is taken up by two figures dangling over the mountainous waves. A half-conscious woman is being rescued by a seaman with the aid of ropes and a pulley. The woman's sexuality was apparent even in 1884: "She is a buxom lassie..." the *New York Times* wrote. "She has nothing on but her shoes, stockings, and dress." Critic Jules Prown later wrote, "Homer seems to indulge in a schoolboy's fantasy [of] heroism, damsel-saving, and sex." The seaman's face is hidden by the woman's wind-whipped red scarf, but "it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that if we were to unveil the face...we would find Winslow Homer."



If Homer is the seaman, who is the fair damsel he is rescuing? The unnamed woman from the late '70s, perhaps. Or maybe, as art historian Henry Adams has suggested, the picture represents Homer's wish to save his beloved mother from death: its creation coincided with her final illness, and she died soon after it was finished. In either case, the image brings to mind lines by James Tate: "For the first time, the only / thing you are likely to break / is everything, because / it is a dangerous / venture. Danger invites / rescue--I call it loving." ("Rescue" from *The Lost Pilot* by James Tate. Copyright 1978 by James Tate. First published by the Ecco Press in 1978.)

In *The Life Line*, nature has begun to take on an ominous, threatening quality. In the 1880s Homer's women could be rescued, but in the later pictures, death at the hands of an indifferent universe is inevitable. *The Signal of Distress* shows the progression. In its original state, the painting depicted a heroic rescue--the small boat in the distance, although signaling for help, was under full sail. But Homer altered the boat. He dismantled it, removed the sails, and there is now no sign of life; the boat is adrift in a cruel sea. Attempts at rescue will be futile.

If Homer's art up to 1879 forms a social history, of America, his late work is almost the opposite: it is a highly personal vision of the eternal human predicament, of the pathetic vulnerability of all life in the face of death. In most of Homer's great works after his crisis, death is an immense presence; men and wild animals see it, fear it, struggle with it, and then, at times, accept it. The acceptance of death is the link between Homer's two best-known paintings, *The Gulf Stream* and *Fox Hunt*. *The Gulf Stream*, his most melodramatic and lurid painting, was begun in the months after his father's death in 1898. There is no doubt about what's happening in the picture: a single black man on a dismantled boat faces death in several forms--hunger, thirst, circling sharks, waves and even a waterspout. In the distance, a ship passes by under full sail, oblivious, as the Gulf Stream carries the man farther out to sea. Still, the victim has a certain listless dignity in the face of all this disaster. He does not seem to ask for an end to his isolation; he does not seem to ask to live.

Perhaps it was the mystery of the black man's indifference that caused the painting to go unsold for seven years. Perhaps, too, this is what prompted a request for a "full description"--which Homer answered with an acid irony: "I regret very much that I have painted a picture that requires any description. ...You can tell these ladies that the unfortunate negro who is now so dazed & parboiled will be rescued & returned to his friends and home, & ever after live happily."

Homer began as a figure painter; humans were at the center of his art, and the setting was secondary. But gradually the setting--the natural world--became more and more dominant. In the late work, the human figure is at the mercy of nature, beneath it, overpowered by it.



Dark forms of half-starved crows loom above a fleeing fox in one of Homer's most dramatic and tragic works, *Fox Hunt*, from 1893. With the advantage of numbers, the crows could vanquish the prey, its escape slowed by the deep snow of Maine.

The masterpiece called *Fox Hunt* (1893), his largest painting, has no humans in it at all. But the situation, again, is one of danger and death: a flock of starving crows attacks a bright red fox that is caught in deep snow. The fox--usually a predator itself--is the "point of view character": the crows hovering overhead seem terrifying, like winged death. But the fox, like the black man in *The Gulf Stream*, is not regarding the source of danger; instead, its head is turned toward the quiet sea, lit in the distance by a winter sun--as if looking beyond its own death.

By the end of his career, Homer had boiled things down to their most basic elements. In 1890 he began what was, in narrative terms, his simplest work: he began to paint seascapes, many with no figures--no humans, no animals. Just the sea and the earth; the elemental battle of waves against rock, over and over. But it isn't true that these pictures are a world without people. One person, of course, is there: Winslow Homer. The painter is finally alone with the sea.

In his last years, he became the Winslow Homer of popular legend: the gruff old man by the sea, "an aloof, silent, all but misanthropic figure locked away in the stony fastness of Prout's Neck," as art historian Marc Simpson puts it. Homer was pleased when he could report on wintry difficulties ("Great storm last night. Cold as the d---"). He had a portable studio built, a little house on runners, so he could get close to the sea--and be protected from human intrusion.

In late works such as *Right and Left* from 1909, Homer explored the issues of destiny and mortality. The ducks are caught at the moment of their being hit by a blast from a shotgun.

National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC



But Winslow Homer was not so much of a curmudgeon as he seems. He respected and loved his brothers, and was generous to family and neighbors (an ill nephew received a check from Homer with the gruff note: "No thanks for this"). For all his crankiness to strangers, and the isolation that is apparent in his paintings, he was not unhappy. "My home here is *very pleasant, I do not wish a better place*," he wrote. And again: "The life that I have chosen gives me my full hours of enjoyment for the balance of my life. The Sun will not rise, or set, without my notice, and thanks. "

It seems strange. To avoid human contact, to repress love and yet to be thankful for life. But perhaps it is this riddle that makes Homer a great painter. His works are not simply forbidding; they are luminous as well. One of his last paintings, *Right and Left*, expresses the duality perfectly. Two golden-eye ducks fly over the ocean waves. A man in a distant boat fires a shotgun at them--in fact, the radiant orange blast of the gun is aimed directly at the viewer. One of the ducks is rising, the other falling. The picture is about the moment of death. Or is it? Golden-eyes, as Homer knew, typically dart downward when threatened. Death is close, but escape is possible. We are in the moment between life and death. This, Winslow Homer seems to be saying, is how life always is.

As he was working on *Right and Left*, he wrote his brother: "I am so very thankful for all '*His mercies*' that I now write to you. There is certainly some strange power that has some overlook on me & directing my life. That I am in the right place at present there is no doubt about. ..." A month later, the crusty old hermit was even more sanguine about life: "All is lovely," he wrote, "outside my house & inside of my house & myself. " On September 29, 1910, at 74 years of age, Winslow Homer died in his small house in Prout's Neck, in the simple universe he'd found at the edge of the sea.