



Homer, Winslow (1836-1910)

by Richard G. Mann

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One of the most prolific and important American painters and printmakers of the second half of the nineteenth century, Winslow Homer created a distinctly American, modern classical style.

For this and other reasons, his works have often been compared to the achievements of such prominent nineteenth-century American authors as Henry Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman.

Homer dealt with many of the same themes that these writers did, including the heroism displayed by ordinary individuals, when confronted by seemingly insuperable difficulties; the camaraderie and friendships enjoyed by soldiers and working men; and the isolation of the individual in the face of the "Other."

Education and Early Career

Born in Boston on February 24, 1836, Homer was initially trained as an artist by his mother, Henrietta Benson Winslow, who successfully exhibited watercolors of flowers and other still life subjects throughout her adult life.

Between 1855 and 1857, he was apprenticed to John H. Bufford, a nationally prominent commercial artist, based in Boston; with this training, he began to do free-lance work for *Harper's Weekly* and other magazines.

Aspiring to establish himself in the fine art world, he moved in 1859 to New York where he took painting lessons and began to exhibit drawings and paintings of urban scenes (for example, *Skating in Central Park*, 1860, shown at the National Academy of Design, April, 1860).

In 1861, Homer was commissioned by *Harper's Weekly* as a special artist/correspondent to record the events of the Civil War. Homer failed to produce the heroic battle scenes that his editors had wanted. Yet his images of the daily lives of ordinary soldiers greatly appealed to the magazine's readers and helped to establish his reputation.

Among other subjects, he represented guard duty (*A Sharp-Shooter on Picket Duty*, wood engraving, 1867); punishments for minor infractions (*A Punishment for Intoxication*, painting, 1863); medical care for the wounded (*The Surgeon at Work at the Rear During an Engagement*, wood engraving, 1862); and recreation (*Soldier Dancing*, drawing, 1862).

As the war ended, Homer revealed the personal "costs" of the conflict in such images as *The Empty Sleeve at Newport* (wood engraving, 1865), which represents a one-armed man, riding in a carriage with a sad, aloof well-dressed woman.



Winslow Homer and three of his paintings: *The Herring Net*, *Undertow*, and *Rum Cay*. Northwestern University Library Art Collection.

Simultaneously, he began to develop his mature classicizing style in such idyllic works as *A Game of Croquet* (1866); in this carefully balanced composition, he endowed the two women with the strength and solidity of the figures in ancient Greek reliefs.

On a professional level, Homer's extended stay in Paris, from 1867 to 1869, seems to have been most important in reinforcing his sense of confidence. In contrast to most nineteenth-century American artists who traveled to Europe, he did not substantially alter his style to accord with European conventions.

Although Homer continued to depict the recreation of the prosperous urban middle classes (for example, *Long Beach, New Jersey*, 1869), he increasingly devoted himself to scenes of country life.

He began to create representations of single figures and pairs of hunters, which remained a recurring theme in his work for the rest of his life (for example *The Trapper, Adirondacks*, 1870; and *After the Hunt*, 1892). Although it is often interpreted as a straightforward celebration of rural life, *Snap the Whip* (1872) also suggests the dangers involved in the transition from childhood to adulthood, as the boys tumble into the distance.

Homer's Private Life

Very little is known about Homer's "private" life. He consistently refused to answer personal questions from critics and potential biographers, and he left no revealing diaries or other personal papers. His reclusiveness is indicated by the fact that he produced no self-portraits; in contrast, most American and European painters of the nineteenth century eagerly exploited the rapidly growing market for images of artists.

Most historians have adamantly maintained that Homer remained a bachelor because he was extraordinarily "shy" around women. However, such deeply moving and psychologically complex pictures as *The Country School* (1871) and *Mending the Nets* (1882), among many others, suggest a respect for and understanding of women that was very unusual for a male artist of the era. Thus, it would seem more plausible to suggest that Homer simply may not have been interested in women sexually.

Constructing Homer as a solitary eccentric, who virtually withdrew from human society, most scholars have overlooked evidence of significant, intimate associations with other men.

One of his closest friends was Albert Kelsey, a fellow artist whom he initially met in 1858 in Massachusetts. In 1867, Kelsey traveled with Homer to Paris, where they lived together for the next two years.

A studio photograph, made while they were in Paris, mimics the conventions of marriage portraits, as do so many photographic portraits of male friends of this period. Kelsey inscribed the back of the photograph with the names "Damon and Pythias," famous ancient Greek heroes and lovers.

In the 1890s, Homer remembered their friendship in the humorous and erotically suggestive drawing "Albert Kelsey riding a giant turtle in the Bahamas."

Homer's closest companion in the final years of his life was an African-American man, Lewis Wright, who worked as his servant and lived at his Prout's Neck, Maine estate from 1895 to 1910. There are indications that some of Homer's acquaintances were disconcerted by the apparent closeness of his friendship with Wright. While most "negative" reactions involved race, other "unmentionable" factors may also have been involved.

Images of Male Bonding, Depictions of Women

Throughout his career, Homer created images that celebrated diverse aspects of male friendships. Thus, he depicted soldiers, unified in melancholy longing for peacetime home life (*Home, Sweet Home*, 1863); wilderness guides enjoying the beauties of nature (*Two Guides*, 1871); and fishermen laboring together (*The Herring Net*, 1885) and coping with dangerous storms (*The Signal of Distress*, 1890).

The glorification of "male bonding" was a prominent theme in nineteenth-century art and literature, but it is hard to find any comparisons in the work of his male contemporaries for Homer's sensitive depictions of the pleasure and strength that women derive from one another.

Thus, he depicted middle-class women relaxing together on pleasant summer days (*The Croquet Match*, 1868; and *Promenade on the Beach*, 1880) and strong women, united in their work (*Mussel Gatherers*, 1882). Homer even created a notably romantic image of two women dancing together on a moonlit beach (*Buffalo Girls*, 1890).

By contrast, Homer's depictions of male/female couples often evoke the loneliness and emotional distance of physically close individuals (for example, *All in the Gay and Golden Weather*, wood engraving, 1869). He also expressed the dangers posed to women by men in images such as *To the Rescue* (1907), which shows a man approaching a female couple with a noose.

Throughout the 1870s, Homer created numerous images of a solitary female figure, which surprised and disconcerted critics because of the despair and suppressed tension which they conveyed (such as *Reading*, 1877; and *Blackboard*, 1877). Dark, murky backgrounds (as in *Shall I Tell Your Fortune?*, 1876) intensify the foreboding sense of mystery which these works seem to embody.

It has been demonstrated that the red-haired "woman," depicted in many of these, actually was a boy, whom Homer hired as a model. The documented identification of the model helps to explain the "masculine" qualities of the figure, which also disturbed contemporary viewers.

Most scholars continue to deny the relevance of the model's gender and insist that the series represents Homer's frustration about a failed romance with a woman. The series does contain various symbolic references to love, but it seems possible that Homer may have been expressing despair about the suppression of same-sex romance in peacetime American society.

Whatever this series may represent, Homer does seem to have undergone some sort of personal crisis in the later 1870s. It may be coincidental, but it is interesting to note that laws against sodomy began to be more rigorously enforced in New York at this time.

Homer's Later Career

Homer precipitously abandoned New York in 1881. He lived for the next two years in Tynemouth, England, a small fishing village on the harsh North Sea coast. There, he created austere and deeply moving images of monumentally scaled figures, gazing at the open sea (*Inside the Bar, Tynemouth*, 1883) and struggling to earn a living from it (*Watching the Tempest*, 1881).

When he returned to America, Homer moved permanently to Prout's Neck, Maine, also an isolated coastal town, where he continued to depict individuals, heroically working and struggling against storms and other difficulties (for example, *The Fog Warning*, 1885).

Homer shipped his plates back and forth to his printer in New York, as he sought to create large prints that had the same severe, heroic power as his paintings. In some cases, he depicted the same subject in both a painting and a print--as he did, for example, for both *Life Line*, (1884), and *Eight Bells*, (1887). In contrast to the practice of many nineteenth century painters, the prints differed in at least some respects from the paintings and attest to Homer's bold exploration of the possibilities of the print medium.

In the 1890s, Homer traveled extensively in the Caribbean and the American Gulf Coast, where he made countless watercolors, capturing both the beauty of the scenery (*Flower Gardens and Bungalow*, Bermuda, 1899) and the devastation wrought by tropical storms (for example, *After the Hurricane*, 1899).

In his paintings of the Caribbean and of the American South, Homer depicted persons of African descent with a dignity and a lack of stereotype, exceptional among white artists of the period. Among the most famous of Homer's Caribbean works is *Gulf Stream* (1899), a heroic and sensually charged representation of the dazed survivor of a tropical storm.

Also during his later years, Homer did a series of paintings of animals and birds that are apparently seeking to escape from hunters (for example, *The Fox Hunt*, 1893; and *Right and Left*, 1909). It is indicative of Homer's continued development as an artist and as an individual that he was able to move from powerful images of hunters to these eloquent expressions of the plight of the hunted.

Homer died on September 29, 1919 in Prout's Neck.

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