



# *Winslow Homer Essay*

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Of all American artists of the nineteenth century, Winslow Homer was the most vital and colorful, and the most varied, with the widest range in subject and style. In his day he was an innovator, as every strong artist is. He saw in American life that no other artist had seen, and he painted them in new ways. He appeals equally to the artist and the layman, by his picturing of stirring aspects of nature and humanity, by the freshness of his vision, and by his high degree of artistry.

The first half of the nineteenth century, in both Europe and America, had been dominated by the Romantic Movement. But by the middle of the century, Romanticism had run its course, and the most vital artists were turning to contemporary life for subjects. Of this international naturalistic trend the leader was Gustave Courbet, a child of Romanticism in revolt against his parentage. The younger Naturalists went further in their abandonment of traditional styles, their direct-from-nature vision, and their awakening interest in outdoor light and color, in which they anticipated Impressionism. These forerunners of Impressionism appeared independently in several countries: Jongkind in Holland, Boudin in France, Fattori in Italy, and Homer in the United States. In Homer's case his naturalism was native and personal, a product of first-hand contact with the life around him, little influence by development abroad.

The American art world in which he grew up was still ruled by the grandiloquent romanticism of the Hudson River School, with their huge panoramic canvases. Rebellious against this provincialism, Homer's generation turned to Europe, and some of the most gifted such as Whistler and Sergeant became complete cosmopolites. But Homer, while having foreign experience, lived almost all his life in America, and drew almost all his material from the American scene. Before his day our genre painters had pictured everyday life with homespun sentiment and genial humor. Homer continued this native genre tradition, but with a broader range, a stronger realism, and a deeper emotional content. Thus he brought to maturity the painting of the American scene which has ever since been one of the major trends of our art.

Winslow Homer was a Yankee born and bred, and a descendant of generations of Yankees. The Homers had settled in Massachusetts almost two centuries before he was born in Boston, February 24, 1836. His family was solid middle-class. Brought up in Cambridge, he had a happy

outdoor boyhood that gave him a lifelong love of the country. From youth he was strong-willed, independent, terse in speech, and with a dry Yankee sense of humor. He was almost entirely self-taught. Apprenticed at nineteen to a Boston lithographer, he loathed the drudgery of the job, and on his twenty-first birthday he launched himself as a free-lance illustrator. Harper's Weekly, the chief illustrated magazine of the time, accepted his work from his first try, and after two years he left Boston for New York. Soon he was one of the best-known illustrators in the country, notable for his native flavor and strong draftsmanship. When the Civil War broke out he went to the front several times as a staff artist for Harper's. His war drawings were outstanding for their realism. There was nothing heroic about them; mostly they showed everyday life in camp rather than battles. Their bare honesty, their sense of character and humor, and their bold graphic quality, set them apart. No other artist left so authentic a record of how the Civil War soldier really looked and acted. Their nearest equivalent in literature was not to appear for thirty years-Stephen Crane's Red Badge of Courage.

But the career of an illustrator did not satisfy Homer; he wanted to be a painter. He joined the night classes of the National Academy of Design, which, like most American art schools of the time, had little to offer: probably he did no more than draw from casts, with no chance to paint, or to study the nude. He did take four of five painting lessons from Frederic Rondel, a French artist in New York. Next summer he went out into the country and began to paint direct from nature. This was the extent of his art education; everything else he learned for himself. Actually, his most valuable training came from his experience as an illustrator, which taught him how to observe, and how to record essential forms and movements swiftly and accurately.

His first paintings, began when he was twenty-six, were of the war. One of the earliest showed a soldier being punished for drunkenness, of which Homer himself said in later years, "It is about as beautiful and interesting as the button on a barn door." This and another oil he placed in an exhibition, and declared that if they were not sold he would give up painting and take a full-time job with Harper's. His elder brother Charles, who acted as his guardian angel all his life, bought them secretly-a fact which Winslow did not discover until years later, when he was so angry that he did not speak to Charles for weeks. Other war paintings followed, and in 1866 his from the Front created something of a sensation, and made his reputation as a painter. Thereafter he often suffered adverse criticism and low finances, but he was never obscure.

After the war Homer turned for subjects to what he had always loved best-country life. He disliked the city, and though spending his winters in New York for over twenty years, he never

painted it. In this he was not alone. New York of Boss Tweed's day, like most American cities, was far from decorative—a great ugly sprawling town laid out in monotonous rectangularity, with filthy streets and slums. It was hard for a painter to find here the kind of urbane harmony that Manet, Degas and Renoir were finding in Paris. The American city was not to become an accepted subject for art until the early twentieth century.

From boyhood home had retained a passion for country life. He liked hunting and fishing, and he was a born wanderer. His summer wanderings took him over rural New England and eastern New York State, and sometimes south to Virginia and North Carolina. It was these summer months that furnished material for almost all his early paintings and illustrations.

We are used to of Homer as always the hermit of his older years, painting his epics of the sea and the forest. But the young Homer was a different person. At thirty he was good-looking though not conventionally handsome—short, lean, with an aggressive aquiline nose, handlebar mustache, and a poker face—and somewhat of a dandy, going in for the loud checks, high collars and bowler hats of the well-dressed young man of the day. Though reserved and taciturn, he had many friends, and enjoyed social affairs. While he remained a bachelor all his life, a close friend said that "he had the usual number of love affairs."

Certainly his early works give ample evidence of an admiration for feminine beauty and an eye for fashion. He liked to paint and draw the world of summer resorts, with women in the leading roles. In this age of increasing physical freedom, these girls were no languishing Victorian females but young Amazons, playing croquet, riding, picnicking, bathing—ladylike recreations by our standards, but the most strenuous allowed the sex in those days. On the croquet lawn the young ladies in bright contrasting hoopskirts stand out like gay-plumaged birds against the green grass (plates 6, 12). They ride up the new Mount Washington carriage road in sunbonnets and billowy white skirts (plate 9). At Long Branch, summer residence of President Grant, they gather on the bluffs, the sea breeze blowing their flounced skirts and parasols (plate 24). They appear on the beach in voluminous bathing suits, to emerge from the water sodden and dripping. Bathing in those days was still a little risqué; one critic felt that *High Tide* (plate 10) was "perhaps not quite refined." (The girl seated on the beach, according to Homer family tradition, was the object of the young artist's most serious love affair, which ended unhappily because he did not have the income to marry her—and event that was to affect deeply his attitude toward women and society.)

His women were invariably young and good-looking, with the air of mingled independence and innocence that marked the American girl of the period. He delighted in their crinolines, puffed

sleeves, flounces, turbans, flying ribbons, and all the charming absurdities of that un-streamlined day. But he did not idealize them; they remained healthy, solid human beings. Whatever sentiment his art contained was extremely reserved. Along with his preoccupation with the fair sex went a certain aloofness: he pictured them as highly decorative creatures rather than intimately realized individuals, as Thomas Eakins would have done. Yet Homer was one of the first and most sympathetic painters of the American girl, later so favorite a subject of our artists and writers. His pictures form an engaging record of the fashionable country-life of the 1860's and 1870's—a visual counterpart of the early novels of William Dean Howells and Henry James.

But even more often he represented the simpler life of the deep country and its natives. While the American farm had long been a favorite subject for our artists, Homer saw it with a freshness and authenticity that were new in our genre painting. His country people with their uncouth figures and clothes were not sentimentalized, nor were their homely farms with bare wooden buildings, stony pastures, rail fences and tumble-down walls. But beneath this honest realism was a deep-rooted attachment to this life spent so close to the earth, in intimate contact with nature, regulated by the cycle of the seasons. Haymakers pausing in the noon heat; a farmer's wife at the kitchen door blowing the dinner horn; a snowbound farmhouse with boys digging a path through shoulder-high snow—the character and flavor of the old American farm had never been painted with more truth or love.

Children played a leading part in many of these rural scenes. They were pictured with a sympathy that had no trace of the mawkish sentimentality common at the time. Homer had retained both the child's realism and the child's sense of wonder; his art is the world as a boy sees and feels it, painted with a man's grasp of actuality. This world has an early-morning freshness, a sense of unexplored delight, such as we remember from childhood days in the country, when work was play, a day's fishing an adventure, being snowbound pure joy. Underlying the sober naturalism of Homer's style was a deep strain of idyllic poetry. This mingling of naturalism and idyllicism linked him to such fellow New Englanders as Thoreau and Whittier.

This self-identification with childhood appeared also in American literature of the time. Our writers of the Gilded Age were attracted to the golden world of childhood more than to the raw industrialized America in which they lived. The 1860's and 1870's were producing such books as *Little Women* and *Tom Sawyer*. Passages in them read like Homer's pictures put into words. But his art was not a nostalgic reconstruction of a lost world; it was too first-hand, too actual for that. It was nearer the poetic realism of Mark Twain than that nostalgia of Longfellow's

*A boy's will is the wind's will,  
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.*

Homer's unusual combination of utter authenticity and a reserved lyricism gave his early pictures their unique flavor and attraction. Later, this early work was eclipsed by his mature work, and only in recent years has it been rediscovered and re-appraised. Today we see that it had the candor and freshness that belong to youth, and which maturity cannot recapture; and that this record of Homer's younger years forms one of the happiest chapters in American art.

Homer's early work had many resemblances to that of this younger contemporary Thomas Eakins. Both men painted the contemporary life of the United States, both were lovers of the outdoors, and both were Naturalists—in fact, the two leading American representatives of the worldwide Naturalistic movement. Homer was concerned with man in his relation to nature, Eakins with man in himself. Homer was the more varied and poetic, Eakins the more serious and profound. In the end their paths diverged: Eakins became the greatest American portraitist of the period, Homer the greatest painter of the outdoor world.

In his youth Homer once said, "If a man wants to be an artist, he should never look at pictures." Like much that he said, this has to be taken with a grain of salt. But it is hard to detect the influence of any particular painters or schools in his early work. His style was that of a man who had looked at nature more than art. It had a quality as attractive as it is rare in the modern world—an innocent eye. He was painting by eye more than by tradition, painting what he saw, not what other artists had taught him to see.

From the beginning he worked much outdoors. This was still the heyday of the Hudson River School, and Homer was one of the first to get away from their studio conventions and to capture outdoor light and color as they appeared to the eye. He saw things in broad masses of color and light-and-shadow, and put them down that way, freshly and naively. To him, light and its effect on the object were almost as important as the object itself. Almost, but not quite; he would not have agreed with Manet that "the most important person in any picture is the light." To him the object remained paramount.

He had an innate sense of decorative values. He realized, consciously or unconsciously, that lines, shapes and colors were not only means of representing reality, but that they can in themselves give direct sensuous pleasure. No matter how naturalistic, his style always showed a feeling for the purely physical appeal of color, pigment and line, and the patterns they created. This decorative quality, which had appeared even in his early illustrations, resembles that of Japanese art—an influence

that probably first reached him through his close friend John La Farge, who was collecting Japanese prints in the early 1860's.

There were also interesting parallels between Homer and the French Impressionists. They shared a lively interest in the contemporary scene, a concern with outdoor light and visual appearances, a sense of decorative values, and even some of the same stylisms, such as the simplified massing of lights and shadows. And both had affinities to Japanese art. There are startling likenesses between Homer's Croquet Scene of 1866 (plate 6) and young Claude Monet's Women in a Garden of the same year. These likenesses couldn't have been a result of influence either way, for both pictures were painted before Homer had been in Europe, before Impressionism had reached America, indeed before it had fully emerged in France.

Not until he was 30, in the fall of 1866, did Homer go abroad, spending ten months in France. As far as we know he did not study in an art school, but spent time looking and painting on his own, working more in the country than in Paris (plates 7, 9). Where he spent at least part of his time is indicated by two illustrations of Paris dancehalls, which Harper's published with this pious editorial comment: *"We shall not venture to look into the abyss on the brink of which these frenzied men and women are dancing, and this too curious crowd of spectators is treading. This is work for the severe and steady of the preacher and moralist."*

Of what art Homer saw in Paris there is little evidence. The Universal Exposition of 1867 was on, and he had two pictures in it; that he visited it is proved by a portrait of a woman flower seller there. The Japanese had a pavilion with a full exhibition of their art, which aroused wide public interest. It was an art already known to advanced French artists, as it probably was to Homer. Outside the exhibition grounds, Courbet and Manet were holding their own independent exhibitions. Manet had not yet begun to paint outdoors, as Homer had been doing for several years. The other future Impressionists, most of whom were several years younger than Homer, were still unknown; their first exhibition was still seven years in the future, as was the name "Impressionist."

Homer's paintings done in France, of which seventeen are known, reveal little change in his style. After his return to this country, his work showed an increasing awareness of sunlight and atmosphere, a higher, blonder key, and a greater breadth and looseness of handling. This was probably partly a result of his seeing French art in general, and perhaps the Japanese exhibition; partly an effect of the light and air of France; and partly the inevitable result of his growth in vision and skill. In any case the differences were in degree, not in kind. Certainly France had no such influence on him as on his younger and more suggestible fellow countrymen who were soon to

begin flocking to Paris. The basic fact is that Homer, before he abroad, had developed an independent brand of Impressionism, based on first-hand observation of nature, and with affinities to Japanese art; and that the French experience merely confirmed and strengthened these tendencies.

Until he was about 40 Homer continued to support himself largely by illustrating. Almost all his illustrations were reproduced by wood-engraving. In this process, the artist drew his picture of a fine-grained wooden block, polished and coated with white so as to present a surface almost like paper. The block was then turned over to an engraver, who cut away the bare white surface, leaving the artist's drawn lines in relief when printed; this gave a reproduction of the original drawing, in reverse. The functions of artist and engraver were entirely separate; as far as we know, Homer never engraved a block himself.

Wood-engraving is essentially the same process as printing from type; the raised surfaces print, and the impression is in flat black. This very flatness gives it a decorative quality and makes it harmonize perfectly with type. In the hands of illustrators who respected its nature, it was a beautiful medium. Homer was definitely one of these. Although he used tone, he never lost sight of the essentially linear character of the medium. The picture was built on a strong line drawing, probably in pencil, with washes of ink. Everything was clear-cut; outlines were bold, and the areas of light and shadow were sharply defined. The large simplicity of his forms, and his sense of pattern, gave his illustrations a fine decorative quality, reminding us again of Japanese prints, to which they were of course related in technique. Homer composed his illustrations carefully, often using paintings, watercolors and drawings already executed, sometimes taking several and combining them, producing compositions more complete than any of them. These illustrations were among the most carefully designed of all his works, comparable to the best of his mature paintings.

It is a curious fact that Homer did not take up watercolor painting, of which he was to be one of the modern masters, until he was 37. In 1873 he devoted a whole summer at Gloucester to a delightful series in which children played the leading roles (plates 15-19). Watercolor was just beginning to be widely practiced in this country; in the words of a critic of the time, it had been "looked upon as pretty fancy work, fit for girls and amateurs." The medium suited Homer perfectly from the first. He was essentially a draftsman and an observer of the outdoor world, and in watercolor he could work direct from nature, proceeding from a pencil sketch to a finished picture in color in one sitting. In watercolor he made the discoveries—of places, subjects, light, color—that he later embodied in his oils. The transparency of the medium, with the white paper showing through, made an immediate difference in his color. His early oils had been comparatively dark; in watercolor

he at once achieved more luminosity. His swift, skillful draftsmanship, learned in years of illustrating, had full scope in watercolor. The combined freshness and sureness of his watercolor handling anticipated the later development of his painting style. And from the first his watercolors sold well—probably one reason why he gave up illustrating after 1875.

It is amusing to consider that Homer's work was at first considered quite radical by the critics. They could not understand his homely subject, why his color was so peculiar, why he did not bother to finish his pictures—a reception somewhat like that of the French Impressionists. His most perceptive critic, if in some ways the most devastating, was young Henry James, who wrote in 1875: "Mr. Homer goes in, as the phrase is, for perfect realism, and cares not a jot for such fantastic hairsplitting as the distinction between beauty and ugliness. He is a genuine painter; that is, to see, and to reproduce what he sees, is his only care ... He not only has no imagination, but he contrives to elevate this rather blighting negative into a blooming and honorable positive. He is almost barbarously simple, and, to our eye, he is horribly ugly; but there is nevertheless something one likes about him. What is it? For ourselves, it is not his subjects. We frankly confess that we detest his subjects—his barren plank fences, his glaring, bold, blue skies, his big, dreary, vacant lots of meadows, his freckled, straight-haired Yankee urchins, his flat-breasted maidens, suggestive of a dish of rural doughnuts and pie...He has chosen the least pictorial features of the least pictorial range of scenery and civilization; he has resolutely treated them as if they were pictorial, as if they were every inch as good as Capri or Tangiers; and, to reward his audacity, he has incontestably succeeded. "

On the other hand, the public took to Homer from the first, the National Academy elected him an Academician at an early age, and he always found a fair market for his work, though at modest prices—a few hundred dollars for his best oils, as compared with the tens of thousands that the new millionaires were paying for Bouguereaus and Meissoniers.

When he was 45, in 1881, Homer made a second visit abroad that had a deep effect on his art. This time he went to England, spending two seasons in the picturesque fishing port of Tynemouth on the North Sea. Here, working almost entirely in watercolor, he first began to paint the sea, and the men and women who made their living on it (plates 41-44). His fashionable young ladies were things of the past; these fisher girls were sturdy outdoor women who could do a man's work. There was a new feeling for the danger and drama of the sea, a new seriousness and emotional depth.

His style underwent a great change. Probably he saw English watercolor painting; and then there was the English climate, softening outlines and colors. His figures grew rounder and fuller, his

vision more atmospheric, his color deeper and subtler. In a few large watercolors, evidently carefully composed in his studio rather than done direct from nature, he gave his fisherwomen a statuesque, heroic character. These Tynemouth watercolors won over the critics who had thought his American work crude. In every way this English experience marked a turning-point in his art.

The year after his return, Homer, at 47, shook the dust of New York from his feet for good, and settled in a lonely spot on the Maine coast, Prout's Neck—a rocky peninsula jutting out into the Atlantic, with rugged cliffs against which the surf breaks magnificently in storms. Like the entire Maine coast it has the look of having put up a stout fight against the sea for thousands of years. The heights are crowned with pine woods, but even here one is never away from the sound and smell of the sea. At this time only a few natives lived here. Homer built a studio on the cliffs looking over the ocean; and this was his home for the rest of his life. Here he lived absolutely alone, doing his own cooking and housework. Winters he would sometimes visit Boston or New York, or go south, but never for long. Often he spent the whole winter in Maine.

Homer was extremely reticent, and he never divulged what lay behind his withdrawal from civilization. Sometimes he asserted that he left New York to escape jury duty. His unhappy love affair may have played a part. But the deeper causes lay in his character and his relation to man and nature. He had always hated the city, had loved nature as much as man, had felt deeply the relation between the two, to explore this vein of nature poetry, he needed solitude. He had finally found the subjects that mean most to him—the sea and the forest—and the kind of life that would bring him closest to them.

There was no element of defeat in all this. His intimate letters prove that his new life was genuinely, deeply satisfying. "This is the only life in which I am permitted to mind my own business," he once wrote. "I suppose I am today the only man in New England who can do it. I am perfectly happy and contented." 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."

From this time his art changed fundamentally. Women appeared less and less in it, childhood and pastoral country life disappeared altogether. His themes now were the sea and the woods and the mountains, and the lives of sailors, hunters and fishermen. His style lost its lingering traces of naiveté and decorative grace, and became stronger, more masculine and more skillful. The scale of his pictures became larger. Within a few years he had reached full maturity.

The first fruits of this growth were a series of famous sea pictures, dealing with the hard, dangerous lives of men who go down to the sea in ships (plates 45-48). Their central theme was the

peril of the sea, and the drama of man's struggle against the sea. Homer had turned his back on the modern world. This might be called an escape from contemporary society with its complexity and sophistication. But while other artists escaped into the past or into subjective dreams, Homer characteristically remained faithful to actual life-but on a primitive level.

There were his most dramatic works so far, and those in which the "story" was most important. But they were not literary; they expressed themselves in purely pictorial terms. And they had none of the triviality of the bad story-telling pictures that filled the academies of the time; their themes had elemental human meanings. Simple, earnest, almost Biblical, they were as characteristic products of the life and mind of New England as clipper ships and colonial portraits. Like some of Longfellow's famous if hackneyed poems, they have found a permanent place in popular American culture.

The few women he now pictured were outdoor women, as robust as men, with hardly a trace of femininity. They were seen without either sentiment or sensuousness. One thinks of the sensual warmth of Manet and Renoir, the humanity of Eakins, and one sees that with Homer, sexual emotion, one of the motivating forces of art, had become severely sublimated. To this comparative sexlessness, typical of much American art of the period, we can ascribe certain of his limitations as a plastic artist.

As the years passed at Prout's Neck, Homer's solitary life face-to-face with the ocean brought further changes in his art. Humanity appeared less frequently, and his dominant theme became the sea itself the drama of man's struggle against it was replaced by the drama of the ocean and its never-ending battle against the land. It was the sea at its stormiest that he loved. Hazyon days of sunshine and blue water, favorite mood of the Impressionists, did not interest him; one such day he spoke of the ocean contemptuously as "that duck pond down there."

The power and danger of the sea were what moved him. He makes us feel the sheer physical force of the wave, the solidity of the rock, the shock of their collision. We seem to smell the salt, to hear the roar of the breakers, to feel the sting of the spray. We know the dread of gale and fog, and the vast loneliness of the ocean. These great marines are among the strongest expressions in all art of the power and dangerous beauty of the sea. In modern painting their closest counterparts are Courbet's marines, which are more romantic and traditional, while Homer's are realistic, immediate, and vivid in their impact.

The long Maine winters produced some of Homer's most original works. The loneliness and rigor of Prout's Neck are suggested in laconic phrases in his letters: "Night before last it was twelve

below zero." "My nearest neighbor is half a mile away-I am four miles from telegram & P.O. & under a snow bank most of the time" Winter Coast (plate 53) shows the view from his studio window on such a day snow-covered cliffs, rocks sheathed in ice, a leaden sea under a leaden sky. Such scenes contrasted with most American landscape art of the time, which was devoted to nature's tender, smiling moods. Homer preferred her n her lonely, wild and perilous aspects. His passion for solitude harks back to the romanticism of the Hudson River School, but expressed in a more realistic, forceful idiom. In a day of prevailing feminine landscape painting, his was masculine, dramatic, with undertones of melancholy, even of tragedy.

Among these winter scenes was his largest and one of his finest paintings, *The Fox Hunt* (plate 70). In the hard Maine winters, when the earth had long been covered with snow, a flock of starved crows would sometimes attack a fox. There is no trace of man and his works; this primitive struggle is an image of northern solitude. The picture is noteworthy for the handsome decorative quality of the fox's red-brown body against the snow and the crows' black plumage against the gray sky. Here again we feel the affinity to Oriental art that had appeared in his earliest work. But now his decorative sense is combined with a more highly developed naturalism. Some of Whistler's sense of pattern is united to a greater structural strength.

Homer always paid close attention to the exact effects of weather, light and time of day. Of his *West Point, Prout's Neck* (plate 94) he wrote: "The picture is painted fifteen minutes after sunset-not one minute before-as up to that minute the clouds over the sun would have their edges lighted with a brilliant glow of color-but now (in this picture) the sun has got beyond their immediate range & they are in shadow. The light is from the sky in this picture. You can see that it took many days of careful observation to get this, (with a high sea & tide just right)."

One of his last and finest marines, *Early Morning after a Storm at Sea* (plate 71), took him two years to complete, waiting for the right weather conditions (though the actual time spent in painting it was only four sessions of two hours each-eight hours altogether-for he always worked swiftly and surely). Sometimes he kept a subject in mind for 15 or 20 years, as is proved by a watercolor of 1883, on which the oil of 1902 was based.

Such meteorological accuracy reveals him again as essentially an Impressionist. But he differed from orthodox Impressionism in never subordinating nature's solid substance to her appearances, in seeing her as a drama of contending forces rather than as purely visual phenomena, and in retaining precise clarity of vision instead of dissolving objects in luminous atmosphere. In all this his art lay somewhere between Courbet and Impressionism.

Homer seldom talked about his purely artistic ideas or mentioned them in his letters. His philosophy seems to have been wholly naturalistic-that painting was realistic representation of nature. He once said: "When I have selected the thing carefully, I paint it exactly as it appears." Of course he did not really do this, since it is impossible for the human hand to paint anything "exactly as it appears" without the human mind making some unconscious modification. Actually, his work itself gives ample evidence of conscious artistry. His style was highly selective. He saw things in a big way: he simplified, he eliminated, and he concentrated on the large forms and movements. This bigness of style had been instinctive from the first; as he matured it became a deliberate process. "Never put more than two waves in a picture; it's fussy," he once said. One has only to compare him with his academic followers to see the difference between indiscriminating photography and highly selective art.

The innate decorative sense that had been revealed in his earliest work, he deeply sensuous feeling for pigment, color, line and pattern, also became more conscious with the years. In his finest mature paintings the balance of masses, the strong linear rhythms, the large simple patterning, the robust earthy color harmonies, are evidently the result of considered design. This was painting deeply rooted in the senses, as all great art is, but also consciously controlled.

Take the painting *A Summer Night* (plate 55), which was purchased by the French government in 1900. With all its poetry of summer and youth and the magic of moonlight, there is nothing sentimental or vague about the picture. The composition gives evidence of planning. The straight band of the porch forms a solid base of the whole design, echoed by the horizon line. The moon path is in the direct center. These three fixed geometrical elements counterbalance the dancing figures, the surging waves, and the play of moonlight on the water. The color scheme is of the utmost simplicity, consisting of four main tones-slate gray, gray-brown, warm tan, and light blue-but so skillfully used that one is hardly aware of its severe limits. This picture alone is enough to disprove the notion that he was a simple realist merely copying what he saw, and achieving aesthetic values by blind instinct. In such mature works the two main strands of this artistic makeup-naturalism and decoration-have achieved a synthesis. They mark the culmination of a long growth from naive instinct to conscious artistry.

It is true that his gift was more for two-dimensional design than for design of round forms in deep space. Consider for example his *Undertow*, painted in 1886 (plate 45), where he had undertaken the most ambitious of subjects-large-scale figures in full motion. The vigor and largeness of the figures, relieved against the concave of the breaking wave, make this one of the strongest

figure pieces in American art. But if we compare it to such a work as Gericault's Raft of the Medusa, we see that it does not reveal the quality that the greatest plastic creators have possessed—a passion for form, like the more common feeling for color, by which forms of nature are translated into the forms of art, appealing directly to the senses, and through the senses to the mind, as music does. This visual music Homer never attained. He cannot be numbered among the small company of supreme plastic composers, but rather in the larger but still high company of artists who combined powerfully naturalism with great decorative values. That he himself came to realize these gifts and limitations is indicated by the fact that he did not again attempt a subject like *Undertow*, but in his mature paintings concentrated on the artistic qualities of which he was a master.

Homer's purest artistic achievement, aside from his best mature paintings, was in watercolor. Many of his watercolors were painted on the trips which he and his brother Charles, both ardent hunters and fishermen, made almost every summer to the northern woods, especially the Adirondacks. On these trips he combined sport and art, producing scores of watercolors (plates 56-61, 64-66).

For subjects he had all the wilderness and its life: mountain lakes whose still water is broken only by the silver splash of a leaping fish; hunters moving through the solemn stillness and muted light of the deep woods; mountaineers looking out over waves of blue hills, everything clear and cold in the crystal air. These watercolors captured the virgin freshness of the American wilderness as few artists had. They had none of the Byronic romanticism of the Hudson River painters or the poetic sentiment of Inness. Homer's viewpoint, as always, was objective: he saw nature less as a conscious poet than as a woodsman; he expressed not sentiments but physical sensations. By the vividness of his art he conveyed the sensation of forest stillness, the black depths of lake water, the shay grace of deer, the exhilaration of the mountain top, the somber coldness of northern skies, the wild beauty of this entire unspoiled world. His pictures seem specimens of nature, as natural as products of these solitudes as a fresh-caught trout, as tonic as the smell of evergreens or the icy chock of a mountain stream. Never had his art been closer to its primal source, nature.

Most previous American watercolor painting had been meticulous colored drawing. Homer brought to the medium a fresh eye, free handling, stark simplification, daring color—the essential spirit of Impressionism. He was again painting as purely by eye as he had in his youth, but now with an eye and a hand far more experienced. Things were seen in color more than in any previous work. His handling showed a growing boldness and skill. Last trace of the colored drawing had disappeared. He still made a summary pencil sketch, but he was now drawing freely with the brush,

so that the whole process, up to the final brushstroke, was a continuous one of building the picture in washes-of improvisation under full control. Mostly painted on the spot, directly from nature, these watercolors were nevertheless composed with unerring rightness. In pure decorative values they were among his finest works. Their linear beauty, their handsomeness of pattern, their resonant color harmonies, remind one of the great Japanese printmakers.

Searching for fresh camping grounds, in the middle 1890's the two brothers transferred their fishing and hunting to Lake St. John, Quebec, and here Homer painted some of his most powerful watercolors: fellow anglers fishing for land-locked salmon, husky French Canadian and Indian woodsmen shooting the turbulent rapids of the Saguenay River-poised at the entrance where the swift smooth water bears them onward, or fighting the full fury of the river, guiding their canoes with tense skill through the rock-studded current (plates 67, 72, 73, 75). Never had his watercolors shown such energy and movement, such mastery of action, or such earthy resonance of color.

From the late 1890' s Homer spent of almost every winter in Nassau, Bermuda of Florida, and here he painted some of his most remarkable watercolors. The West Indies opened up to him a new world of light and color. In this seemingly dry, matter-of-fact Yankee appeared an unexpected strain of paganism, of delight in the tropical beauty of the Bahamas and their people. He had been interested in Negroes since Civil War days, and in his paintings of the 1870's had been one of the first artists to get away from the old minstrel-show conceptions and to portray them truthfully and understandingly (plates 34, 35). The free primitive life of the West Indian Negroes and their physical beauty had a strong appeal to him: stalwart young men diving for sponges in the blue water, racing along the beach to catch turtles, lolling on the decks of their white fishing sloops; and by contrast with these sun-baked idylls, the tropical violence of a hurricane, and its aftermath-a dead body cast up on the beach beside his splintered boat (plates 78, 79, 83, 84, 85). These works, with all their direct naturalism, had a pagan spirit akin to Greek art. It is remarkable that Homer was in his middle sixties when he painted these watercolors, so young in their vitality and their almost brutal power. We may note that it was about this time that Gauguin was also discovering his earthly paradise in the South Seas.

In the West Indies Homer found the unveiled color of the south-the blues and blue-greens and violets of the Gulf Stream, white sand, pink houses, mahogany bodies, all seen under the powerful southern sun. In his Bahamas watercolors he attained his greatest brilliancy. A new audacity appeared in his harmonies: here as in other respects he had learned economy of means, how to secure the maximum effect by bold, simple combinations. Yet a characteristic severity still

governed his color. It was never sumptuous in the sense of Renoir or Monet; rather it was earthy, full-bodied, and powerful. Whereas the French Impressionists were securing their effects chiefly with high-keyed color, Homer's style remained based on values, and he used a full range of tones, from white down to tones darker than any in the Impressionist gamut. Underlying his color was a composition built in values, so that his pictures retain their structure in black-and white, had characterized his work from the first. As he once said: "I have never tried to do anything but get the proper relationship of values."

His watercolors were always in advance of his oils in clarity of color and freedom of handling. The transparency of the medium and its white paper base gave them a luminosity he never achieved in oil. The oil medium is more complex and offers richer technical possibilities in the way of under painting and glazes; but Homer's oil technique remained relatively direct and simple-masterly within its limits, but never realizing the full richness of which the medium is capable. In watercolor, however, he always preserved the transparency which is the peculiar beauty of the medium, without resorting to opaque pigment. He knew all the tricks of the craft; but he never fell into the vice of technical display, as did Sergeant; his forms were solid, avoiding photographic illusionism. His watercolors combined spontaneity and substance.

Homer's watercolors were the purest expression of that fresh visual sensuousness that was one of the most vital elements in his art. They contain the essence of his genius-the direct impact of nature on the eye, recorded in all its purity by the hand of a master. He himself was well aware of their quality, for he once said: "You will see, in the future I will live by my watercolors." His last dated watercolor, *Diamond Shoal*, 1905, shows his power undiminished.

Homer's southern trips resulted in what is probably his most famous painting, *The Gulf Stream* (plate 86). This picture of a Bahamas Negro lying on the deck of his helpless dismasted boat, waiting apathetically for inevitable death from starvation, thirst, sharks or waterspout, oblivious of the ship passing in the distance, is the last and strongest version of his favorite theme of the perils of the sea-but this time with an added touch of irony in the tropical sunlight and the blue southern sea. A group of school teachers once asked his dealer, Knoedler's, for an explanation of the subject, and Homer wrote: "You can tell these ladies that the unfortunate negro who now is so dazed & parboiled, will be rescued & returned to his friends and home, & ever after live happily."

In his old age Homer was generally considered the foremost painter living in America, and he received many honors. Yet critics still frequently condemned his new pictures for their supposed

ugliness. And although all his important oils were sold during his lifetime, his prices never reached anywhere near the level of such international favorites as Sergeant.

As he grew older his temperamental peculiarities became intensified. He was more and more sensitive to adverse criticism or failure to sell his pictures quickly, and he frequently declared he would paint no more, a threat he would carry out for a few months, until some irresistible new subjects, such as *Kissing the Moon* or *Right and Left* (plates 90, 92), started him working with the energy of youth. But in maturity he averaged only two or three oils a year-taking his time, letting the theme take shape in his mind. His preoccupation with money increased-doubtless a compensation for much he had missed in his personal life. His letters to Knoedler's referred much more to sales than to art; taking them literally, one would believe that he produced only to sell. Actually he painted only what interested him, when he felt like it, and to satisfy a high artistic conscience.

Prout's Neck had become a summer resort, but his neighbors saw little of him. In the fall he greeted with relief the departure of the last of them. As his fame grew, so did his aversion to publicity. Journalists, feminine admirers, autograph hunters, even prospective buyers, found a frosty reception. If he was in a good mood he would excuse himself from seeing them; in a bad mood he could be appallingly rude. More than one well-intentioned visitor found the studio door slammed in his face.

Much of this was the defensive reaction of an essentially shy man. To his family, especially his beloved brother Charles and the latter's wife, he was a different person, deeply if undemonstratively affectionate, concealing his emotions under ironical humor. His year-round neighbors, the Maine natives, also saw a different side of him. Often he helped them in need-but always stealthily. "If you want to know Winslow," said his sister-in-law after his death, "ask the poor people of Prout's Neck."

Up to the end his reserve remained unbroken. When his future biographer William Howe Downes wrote proposing a book on him, he replied: "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." He died in his studio at Prout's Neck on September 29th, 1910, aged seventy-four.

Winslow Homer loved the aspects of nature least touched by man-the sea, the forest, and the mountains. He loved outdoor life and the men who live it. His art was uniquely close to nature, the primary source of all art. He was our greatest pictorial poet of the sea and the wilderness and the pioneer spirit that had explored and settled a continent. In his energy, the pristine freshness of his

vision, and his simple sensuous vitality, he embodied the affirmative elements of the American spirit as no preceding artist had. He did for our painting what Walt Whitman did for our poetry-he made it native to our own earth and air.

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