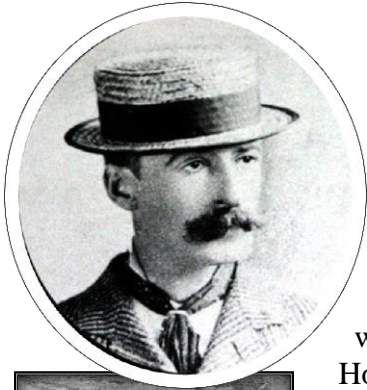


Winslow Homer

(HOE-mer) American

1836 – 1910

74



Winslow Homer is an American landscape painter and printmaker. He is one of the foremost painters in 19th-century America, a preeminent figure in American art. Largely self-taught, Homer first worked as a commercial illustrator. Later he took up oil painting and watercolor. Homer was the second of three sons of Charles and Henrietta Homer. His mother was a gifted amateur watercolorist and his first teacher. She and Winslow had a close relationship throughout their lives. He was like her - quiet, strong-willed, terse, sociable, with a dry sense of humor and with artistic talent.



Homer grew up in rural Cambridge, Massachusetts. His art talent was evident in his early years. Homer's father was a volatile, restless businessman. When Homer was **13**, Charles gave up the hardware store to join in the California gold rush. When that failed, Charles left his family and went to Europe to raise capital for other get-rich-quick schemes that didn't materialize.



At **19**, Homer's father arranged an apprenticeship to a Boston lithographer.

He worked on sheet music covers and commercial work for two years. In 1857 (**21**), he turned down an offer to join *Harper's Weekly*, beginning a freelance career. "From the time I took my nose off that lithographic stone I have had no master, and never shall have any."

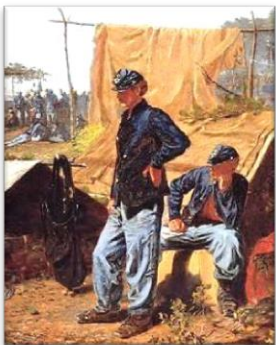


Homer's illustration career lasted nearly twenty years, showcasing Boston and rural New England life in magazines. His quick success was mostly due to his strong graphic design understanding and to the adaptability of his designs to wood engraving.

Until 1863 (**27**) he attended classes at the National Academy of Design. After about a year of self-training, Homer was producing excellent oil work. His mother tried to raise funds to send him to Europe for further study but instead *Harper's Weekly* sent him to the front lines of the Civil War (1861–1865), (**25 -29**) where he sketched battle scenes and camp life. The war work was dangerous and exhausting. Back at his studio, Homer would regain his strength. The war



paintings did not get much attention at that time. Homer showed the effects of the war on the home front, also illustrated women and their work during the war.



Photo, 1880 (44). "On the Beach: Two Are Company, Three Are None ..." 1872 (36), wood engraving. *The Bathers*, 1873 (37). *High Tide*, 1870 (34). *The Sharp Shooter on Picket Duty*: engraving-1862 (26), oil-1863 (27). *Home, Sweet Home*, 1863 (27), oil. *Prisoners from the Front*, 1866 (30), oil.



After the war, Homer turned his attention to scenes of childhood and young women, reflecting nostalgia for simpler times. *Crossing the Pasture* depicts two boys who idealize brotherhood with the hope of a united future after the war that pitted brother against brother. At 27 he was recognized for his maturity of feeling, depth of perception, and mastery of technique. Unlike many artists who were known for only one art medium, Homer was



prominent in a variety.

Homer went to Paris, in 1867 (31) for a year. On exhibit at the Exposition Universelle was his *Prisoners from the Front*. He practiced landscape painting



while continuing to work for *Harper's*, depicting scenes of Parisian life. Although he arrived in France at a time of new fashions in art, Homer's main subject for his paintings was peasant life.

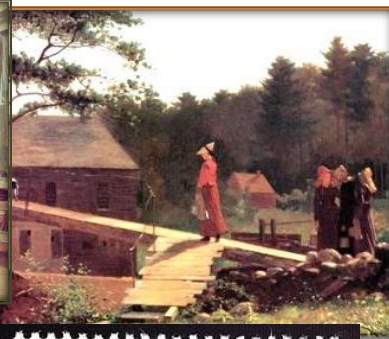
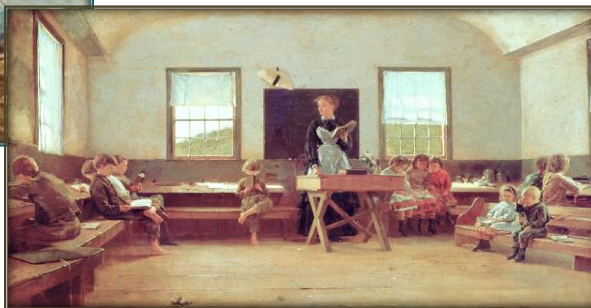
Homer was very private about his personal life and methods. His stance was one of independent style and a devotion to American subjects. As his fellow artist Eugene Benson wrote, Homer believed that artists "should never look at pictures" but should "stutter in a language of their own."



Throughout the 1870s, Homer continued painting mostly rural or idyllic scenes of farm life, children playing, and young adults courting, including *Country School* and *The Morning Bell*.

Early landscapes and watercolors

In 1875 (39), Homer quit working as a commercial illustrator and vowed to survive on his paintings and watercolors alone. Despite his excellent critical reputation, his finances continued to remain precarious. His popular *Snap-the-Whip* and *Breezing Up* paintings were exhibited at the 1876 (40) Centennial Exposition.



Crossing the Pasture, 1871–1872 (35 - 36), oil. *The Bridle Path*, 1868 (32), oil. *Artists Sketching in the White Mountains*, 1868 (32), oil. *Country School*, 1871 (35), oil. *The Morning Bell*, 1872 (36), oil. *Snap the Whip*, 1872 (36), oil. *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)*, 1873–76 (37 - 40), oil, with commemorative 1962 stamp.

Visits to Virginia around 1876 (40) resulted in paintings of rural African American life. Homer's straightforward sensibility style yielded unaffected views, as in *Dressing for the Carnival* and *A Visit from the Old Mistress*.

Homer joined The Tile Club for a time, designing fireplace tiles. Homer's Tile Club nickname was "The Obtuse Bard."



Homer started watercolor painting regularly in 1873 (37). They proved popular, selling more readily than his oils. They varied from detailed (*Blackboard*) to broadly impressionistic (*Schooner at Sunset*).



Homer became reclusive in the late 1870s, shunning urban social life. Living in Gloucester, Homer found a rich source of themes: fishermen, the sea, and marine weather. After 1880 (44), he rarely featured genteel women, focusing instead on working women.

Homer spent two years (1881 – 1882) (45 - 46) in English coastal villages. He wrote, "The women are the working bees. Stout hardy creatures." His paintings became larger, more ambitious. He moved away from the spontaneity and bright innocence of the American paintings of the 1860s and 1870s.

Back in the U.S., Homer showed his English watercolors in New York. Critics noticed the change in style at once, "He is a very different Homer from the one we knew in days gone by." Homer's women were no longer "dolls who flaunt their millinery" but "sturdy, fearless, fit wives and mothers of men."

In 1883 (47), Homer moved to Maine and lived at his family's estate in the remodeled carriage house just seventy-five feet from the ocean. During the rest of the mid-1880s, Homer painted his monumental sea scenes. In *Undertow*, depicting the rescue of two female bathers by two male lifeguards, Homer's figures "have the weight and authority of classical figures." In *Eight Bells*, two sailors carefully take their bearings on deck. Other notable paintings with dramatic struggle-with-nature images are *Banks Fisherman*, *The Gulf Stream*, *Rum Cay*, *Mending the Nets*. These established Homer, as the *New York Evening Post* wrote, "in a place by himself as the most original and one of the strongest of American painters."



Oils: *Dressing for the Carnival*, 1877 (41). *A Visit from the Old Mistress*, 1876 (40). Watercolors: *Schooner at Sunset*, 1880 (44). *Blackboard*, 1877 (41). *Undertow*, 1886 (50) (sold for only \$400). *Eight Bells*, 1886 (50).

In the winters of 1884-5 (48), Homer ventured to warm locations. In Florida, Cuba, and the Bahamas, he did a series of watercolors as part of a commission for *Century Magazine*. The tropics inspired and refreshed. Again, his originality was praised by critics, but didn't please traditional art buyers and he "looked in vain for profits." Homer lived frugally, however, and Charles, his affluent brother, provided financial help.



Crusoe, cloistered on his art island" and "a hermit with a brush." Despite critical recognition, Homer's work never achieved the popularity of traditional Salon pictures. Many of the sea pictures took years

to sell and *Undertow* only earned him \$400. In these years, Homer received emotional sustenance from his mother, brother Charles, and sister-in-law Martha ("Mattie"). After his mom's death, Homer became a "parent" for his aging, c

By 1900 (64), Homer finally reached financial stability, as his paintings fetched good prices from museums and he began to receive rents from real estate properties. He also became free of the responsibilities of caring for his father who died in 1898.

Homer never taught, but his works strongly influenced succeeding generations of painters. American illustrator and teacher Howard Pyle revered Homer, encouraging his students to study him. His student and fellow illustrator, N. C. Wyeth (and through him Andrew Wyeth and Jamie Wyeth), also appreciated him. The elder Wyeth's respect for Homer was "intense and absolute," and can be observed in *Mowing* (1907). Homer's austere individualism is captured in his admonition to artists: "Look at nature, work independently, and solve your own problems."



A Garden in Nassau, 1885 (59).

The Sponge Diver, 1898-99 (62-63). *Keywest*, 1903 (59).

On the Way to Market, Bahamas, 1885 (59).

