Homer and Eakins: American Painters in the Late 1800s

Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins are revered today for their insightful portrayals of Americans at work and play, often infused with multiple levels of meaning. Despite their mutual dedication to realism, the two had vastly different reputations in their own time.

Homer, raised in Boston, was lionized as one of the United States' leading artists. Trained as a printmaker and magazine illustrator, Homer enlivened his narrative scenes, landscapes, and seascapes with keenly observed character types.

Eakins, a Philadelphia painter and art professor, was given only a single one-man show in his whole career. Primarily a portraitist, Eakins chose actions and settings to suit the personalities of specific sitters, often his friends and relatives.

Albert Pinkham Ryder
American, 1847–1917
Siegfried and the Rhine Maidens, 1888/1891

Albert Pinkham Ryder, though a near contemporary of both Homer and Eakins, was a very different sort of painter. Hermitlike and visionary, he explored biblical, literary, and mythological themes. His *Siegfried and the Rhine Maidens* was inspired by Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelungs*. Ryder claimed, "I had been to hear the opera and went home about twelve o'clock and began this picture. I worked for forty-eight hours without sleep or food." Nevertheless, when he exhibited the canvas in New York in 1891, he had been revising it for three years.

Lit by an eerie moon, the Rhine River nymphs recoil in horror when they realize that the German warrior Siegfried possesses their stolen, magic ring. After he refuses to return it, they predict that he will die violently. To evoke impending doom, Ryder devised tortured shapes, crusty textures, and an unearthly green color scheme.

Oil on canvas, .505 x .520 m (19 ⅞ x 20 ½ in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1946.1.1

Thomas Eakins
American, 1844–1916
The Biglin Brothers Racing, 1872

In the decade following the Civil War, rowing became one of America's most popular spectator sports. When its champions, the Biglin brothers of New York, visited Philadelphia in the early 1870s, Thomas Eakins made numerous paintings and drawings of them and other racers.

Here, the bank of the Schuylkill River divides the composition in two. The boatmen and the entering prow of a competing craft fill the lower half with their immediate, large-scale presence. The upper and distant half contains a four-man rowing crew, crowds on the shore, and spectators following in flag-decked steamboats.

Himself an amateur oarsman and a friend of the Biglins, Eakins portrays John with his blade still feathered, almost at the end of his return motion. Barney, a split-second ahead in his stroke, watches for his younger brother's oar to bite the water. Both ends of the Biglins' pair-oared boat project beyond the picture's edges, generating a sense of urgency, as does the other prow jutting suddenly into view.

The precision of Eakins' style reflects his upbringing as the son of a teacher of penmanship. He studied under academic artists in Paris and traveled in Europe from 1866 to 1870. To further his understanding of anatomy, Eakins participated in dissections at Philadelphia's Jefferson Medical College in 1872–1874.

Oil on canvas, .612 x .916 m (24 ⅛ x 36 1/16 in.)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney 1953.7.1

Thomas Eakins
Baby at Play, 1876

In 1876, Eakins joined the faculty of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Painted the same year, *Baby at Play* depicts Ella Crowell, the artist's two-and-one-half-year-old niece, in the side yard of his own Philadelphia home. Ella is totally absorbed with alphabet blocks, having cast aside her ball, doll, and toy horse and cart.

In accord with late nineteenth-century attitudes about education, she has progressed from infantile pursuits to more advanced stages of development. By stacking up the blocks, the child practices language and motor skills. Eakins communicates his niece's serious concentration by arranging her into a solid, pyramidal mass that is nearly life-size and aligned geometrically with the toys, blocks, and paved walk. The brown bricks show Eakins' expertise in mechanical drafting and, with the dark shrubbery, set off Ella's sunlit figure.

Eakins' skill in modeling with light and shadow also marks three small oil studies in the National Gallery of Art. These quick life sketches of African-American subjects are the same size as their final pictures. Two relate to *Negro Boy Dancing* of 1878, a watercolor now in New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. For an oil painting of 1908 now in The Brooklyn Museum, Eakins made *The Chaperone*, in which an old servant knits while a young girl poses nude for a sculptor.

Oil on canvas, .819 x 1.228 m (32 ¼ x 48 ⅜ in.)
John Hay Whitney Collection 1982.76.5

Thomas Eakins
Archbishop Diomede Falconio, 1905

The poet Walt Whitman declared, "Eakins is not a painter, he is a force." Indeed, the uncompromising honesty in Eakins' portraits was thought too crude for social propriety. As one Philadelphia gentleman joked, Eakins "would bring out all the traits of my character that I had been trying to hide from the public for years."

A few doctors, professors, and other intellectuals did appreciate his penetrating analyses. The full-length *Archbishop Diomede Falconio* is among fourteen portraits Eakins created of Roman Catholic clergy. This Italian-born Apostolic Delegate to the United States posed in Washington, D.C., where he resided at the Catholic University of America. As a poor Franciscan friar, he normally shunned the impressive gray silk robes that he wears here. For unknown reasons, the canvas is unfinished. The face and hands appear completed, but the vestments, chair, carpet, and wall paneling have not received their final details.

The church scholar, at age sixty-three, was only two years older than the painter; even so, Eakins rudely called Falconio "the old man." Eakins' manners were blunt, and his art seldom flattered. Among the National Gallery's other candid, late portraits by Eakins are *Louis Husson*, which the artist inscribed as a gift to his friend, a French-born photographer, and equally frank likenesses of Husson's wife and niece.

Oil on canvas, 1.832 x 1.377 m (72 ⅛ x 54 3/16 in.)
Gift of Stephen C. Clark 1946.16.1

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Some of the works by Homer and Eakins discussed in this guide, especially their later paintings, hang in the neighboring galleries.

HOMER AND EAKINS

Winslow Homer
American, 1836–1910
Home, Sweet Home, c. 1863

As a freelance reporter sketching the Civil War's front lines for newspapers and magazines, Winslow Homer developed an incisive candor. His debut as an oil painter occurred in the spring of 1863, with the enthusiastically reviewed exhibition of *Home, Sweet Home.* Two Union infantrymen pause while a military band plays the familiar ballad, reminding them poignantly that their campsite is neither sweet nor home.

The conflict of 1861–1865 changed American society profoundly. With men gone to combat, women managed family businesses and assumed professional roles, such as teaching. These newly independent women, working or relaxing, figure prominently in Homer's postwar subjects.

Homer treated many of his favorite motifs in serial format, creating variations in different media. *The Dinner Horn* depicts a farm maid who also appears in two other oil paintings as well as in an illustration in *Harper's Weekly*. A crisp autumn sunshine is imparted by the bright shadows on her dress and the colorful flutter of leaves blowing across the grass. As she summons the field hands for their meal, a gust of wind reveals a provocative bit of petticoat and her shapely ankles. *The Red School House*, showing a solemn young teacher clutching her book, is among his many scenes of country schools. As one personification of a season, *Autumn* alludes to fashionable attire and, thus, to modern life.

Oil on canvas, .546 x .419 m (21 ½ x 16 ½ in.)
Patrons' Permanent Fund 1997.72.1

Winslow Homer
Breezing Up (A Fair Wind), 1873–1876

The sea, which would dominate Homer's late work, began to assume a role in his paintings as early as 1873, when he summered at Gloucester, Massachusetts. Here, a catboat bearing the name *Gloucester* turns toward home in late afternoon, the day's catch of fish stowed in its cockpit. A brisk breeze raises whitecaps, fills the mainsail, and heels the boat over until its port rail is awash. Counteracting the wind, a fisherman and three boys throw their weight to the starboard side. On the horizon, a gull circles over a two-masted schooner.

The apparent spontaneity bears out Homer's statement, "I try to paint truthfully what I see, and make no calculations." In actual practice, however, Homer did carefully calculate his compositions, including this one. The oil painting, exhibited to popular and critical acclaim in 1876, began with a watercolor study probably done on the spot three years earlier in Gloucester harbor.

Comparison with the initial watercolor and laboratory examination of this final oil reveal many changes in design. Originally, the tiller was guided by the old man instead of a boy. A fourth boy once sat in the place now occupied by the anchor, a symbol of hope. Because in 1876 the United States was celebrating its centennial as a nation, Homer may have made these alterations to suggest the promise of America's youth.

Oil on canvas, .615 x .970 m (24 3⁄16 x 38 3⁄16 in.)
Gift of the W. L. and May T. Mellon Foundation 1943.13.1

Winslow Homer
Hound and Hunter, 1892

At age forty-seven, Homer settled in Prout's Neck, Maine. Always a silent bachelor who guarded his technical methods and personal beliefs, he became almost a recluse. When he left the coast of Maine, it was to fish or hunt in the Adirondack Mountains and Canada or the Caribbean Sea and Bermuda—taking his watercolor supplies with him.

Homer's watercolor sketch for *Hound and Hunter* showed, lying behind the boy, a rifle that the artist later painted out. When this final canvas was exhibited in 1892, its subject was condemned as a cruel sport then practiced in the Adirondacks. Some viewers believed the youth was drowning the deer to save ammunition. The artist curtly responded, "The critics may think that that deer is alive but he is not—otherwise the boat & man would be knocked high & dry."

To clarify that the stag is already dead and no longer struggling, however, Homer did repaint the churning water to hide more of the animal. The hunter, therefore, simply ties up a heavy load, calling off the hound so it will not jump into the boat and swamp it.

Homer once asked a museum curator, "Did you notice the boy's hands—all sunburnt; the wrists somewhat sunburnt, but not as brown as his hands; and the bit of forearm where his sleeve is pulled back not sunburnt at all? I spent more than a week painting those hands."

Oil on canvas, .718 x 1.223 m (28 ¼ x 48 ⅛ in.)
Gift of Stephen C. Clark 1947.11.1

Winslow Homer
Right and Left, 1909

Right and Left is the last major painting Homer completed and exhibited before his death. According to the artist's first biographer, when the untitled canvas was shown by Homer's dealer, "[A] sportsman came in, caught a glimpse of the picture, and at once cried out: 'Right and left!'—admiring…the skill of the hunter who could bring down a bird with each barrel of his double-barreled shotgun in quick succession. So the work was christened."

The shotgun flashes in the distance are from a hunter standing in a boat. Contemporary reports indicate Homer hired a man to fire blank shots in his direction so he could observe the flare through the fog.

A naturalist, Homer may have derived inspiration from John James Audubon's encyclopedic *Birds of America*. In 1836 Audubon had published a print, *Golden-Eye Duck*, showing two birds of this same species in similarly splayed postures. The severe shapes may also reveal an aesthetic influence from the bold patterns in Japanese woodblock prints.

An explosive, jagged energy interacts between the angular points in wings, bills, feet, and waves. The gray morning's chilly colors are punctuated by the birds' yellow feet and eyes, the gun blast, and a sliver of the rising sun. Whether the ducks are darting to escape or already have been hit, the work is a stark metaphor of life and death.

Oil on canvas, .718 x 1.229 m (28 ¼ x 48 ⅜ in.)
Gift of the Avalon Foundation 1951.8.1

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The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.

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