

Winslow Homer (1836–1910) is widely regarded as the greatest American artist of the nineteenth century. From the late 1850s until his death in 1910, Homer produced a body of work distinguished by its thoughtful expression and its independence from artistic conventions. A man of multiple talents, he excelled equally in the arts of illustration, oil painting, and watercolor. Many of his works—depictions of children at play and in school, of farm girls attending to their work, of hunters and their prey—have become classic images of nineteenth-century American life. Others speak to more universal themes such as the primal relationship of man to nature.

This exhibition brings together fifty of the finest works from the National Gallery’s extensive Homer collection. The paintings, drawings, prints, and watercolors are representative of the wide range of Homer’s art, from his early images of the Civil War to his late Caribbean scenes, offering the opportunity to experience and appreciate the breadth of his remarkable achievement.

CIVIL WAR YEARS



Winslow Homer was born in Boston, the second of three sons of Henrietta Benson, an amateur watercolorist, and Charles Savage Homer, a hardware importer. As a young man, he was apprenticed to a commercial lithographer for two years before becoming a freelance illustrator in 1857. Soon he was a major contributor to such popular magazines as *Harper’s Weekly*, and in 1859 he moved to New York to be closer to the publishers that commissioned his illustrations and to pursue his ambitions as a painter.

Sent by *Harper’s* to the front as an artist-correspondent during the Civil War, Homer captured the essential modernity of the conflict in such images as *The Army of the Potomac—A Sharp-Shooter on Picket Duty* (fig. 1). While tradi-

tional battle pictures usually portrayed, in the words of a contemporary, “long lines...led on by generals in cocked hats,” Homer instead shows a solitary figure who, using new rifle technology, is able to fire from a distance and remain unseen by his target. Homer drew upon his experience of the war to create his first oil paintings, many of them scenes of camp life that illuminate the physical and psychological plight of ordinary soldiers. He received national acclaim for these early works, both for the strength of his technique and the candor of his subjects.

AMERICA IN THE 1870S

In the late 1860s, Homer turned to life in rural and coastal America for his subject matter. His postwar work employs a brighter palette and freer brushwork and shows his interest in the fleeting effects of light and atmosphere. The freshness of his touch is evident in the brilliant light and delicate coloration of *The Dinner Horn* (*Blowing the Horn at Seaside*) (fig. 2).



The young woman sounding the call to dinner appears in several other paintings and relates to one of Homer’s favorite motifs throughout the 1870s: the solitary female figure, often absorbed in thought or work. Childhood, an important theme in the work of such contemporary writers as Louisa May Alcott and Mark Twain, became Homer’s principal subject in the early 1870s. Pictures of children gathered in a one-room schoolhouse, playing in the countryside, or sitting on the beach on a summer day suited the postwar nostalgia for the presumed simplicity and innocence of a bygone era. *Breezing Up* (*A Fair Wind*) (fig. 3), an appealing image of three boys and an older man on a sailboat, was hailed for its freshness and energy when it was first exhibited in 1876. Indeed Homer may have wanted to convey the optimism of the American centennial, which was marked by feelings of rejuvenation and great expectations for the future.

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EARLY WATERCOLORS

Homer had been working as an artist for nearly two decades when, in the words of one contemporary critic, he took “a sudden and desperate plunge into watercolor painting.” Long the domain of amateur painters, watercolors had gained professional respectability in 1866 with the formation of the American Water Color Society. Homer recognized their potential for profit—he could produce and sell them quickly—but he also liked the way watercolor allowed him to experiment more easily than oil. He created his first series of watercolors in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1873, and by the time he painted his last watercolor, in 1905, Homer had become the unrivaled master of the medium in America.



Some critics found fault in Homer’s early watercolors for their apparent lack of finish and their commonplace subject matter. Yet Homer valued them from the start. He priced *The Sick Chicken* (fig. 4), a delicate work that demonstrates his early technique

of filling in outlined forms with washes of color, at the steep price of one hundred dollars. Rural life remained one of his central themes for a number of years. In 1878 he visited Houghton Farm, the country house of a patron, where he created dozens of watercolors of farm girls and boys; many of these works were made outdoors.

For a short period in the late 1870s, a decorative quality became visible in Homer’s art. *Blackboard* (cover), which continues the theme of elementary education found in many of his oils, epitomizes this development. The studied elegance of the work’s design derives in part from its monochromatic palette and in part from the geometric patterning found in the bands of color in the background, the checkered apron, and the marks on the board.

CULLERCOATS

In March 1881, Homer sailed from New York to England, where he spent twenty months in the small fishing village of Cullercoats on the North Sea. *Sparrow Hall* (fig. 5), which depicts the town’s oldest house, is one of the few



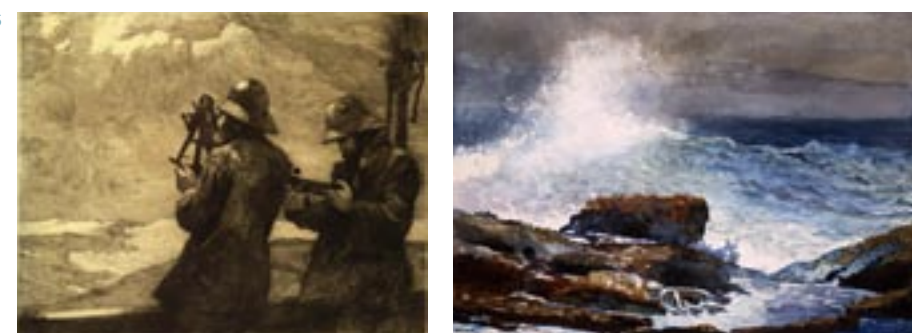
Cullercoats paintings that is not situated at the shore. Like most works from this period, however, it mirrors the activity of the village’s fisherwomen, whose lives were dominated by the strenuous tasks of gathering bait, repairing nets, and hauling and cleaning fish, in addition to traditional domestic chores. Admiring their strength in the face of the stern facts of their lives, Homer endowed these women with dignity and grace.

Homer created mostly watercolors in Cullercoats, including highly finished “exhibition watercolors”—works that, in the English tradition, were

intended to rival the visual impact of oil paintings. These involved preliminary studies and careful planning, reflecting his aspiration to construct a more classical, stable art of seriousness and gravity. The stay in Cullercoats represents a turning point in Homer’s career. His focus there on the arduous life of the village’s fisherfolk heralded his full commitment to the theme of man’s struggle with the sea, which would occupy Homer’s artistic imagination for the rest of his life.

PROUT’S NECK, MAINE

Shortly after returning to New York in 1882, Homer left the city to settle permanently in Prout’s Neck, Maine, in a converted carriage house on family property. There he embarked on a series of images that expanded on the theme of man’s conflict with the sea. *Eight Bells* (fig. 6), an engraving of one of Homer’s best-known paintings, shows two sailors fixing the position of their



vessel with navigational instruments. The moment was not especially remarkable, but Homer distilled from it a heroic image, lending the men a monumentality that had begun to emerge in his English pictures.

Attracted to the stark beauty of Prout’s Neck, as well as to the majesty of the ocean, Homer also began painting the shoreline in various conditions of light and weather. *Incoming Tide*, *Scarboro, Maine* (fig. 7) is one of his first pure marine pictures and an early indication of his primary pictorial concern in later years: the elemental forces of nature. Using watercolor, Homer was able, in such works, to capture the dramatic spray of breakers crashing upon the rocks. A friend later recalled Homer’s attraction to inclement weather: “When I knew

1836

Born in Boston

1842

Family moves to Cambridge, Massachusetts

1854/55

Begins two-year apprenticeship in the Boston lithography shop of John H. Bufford

1857

Becomes a freelance illustrator

1859

Moves to New York City and attends drawing classes at the National Academy of Design

1861

Sent to front as an artist-correspondent at the start of the Civil War

1863

Debuts as professional painter at the National Academy of Design’s annual exhibition

1865

Elected full academician of the National Academy of Design

1866

Sails for France for ten months; exhibits two paintings at the Universal Exposition in Paris

1873

Begins first series of watercolors in Gloucester, Massachusetts

1875

Gives up illustration and relies on sale of watercolors for income

1878

Visits Houghton Farm, New York

1881

Spends twenty months in the fishing village of Cullercoats, England, on the North Sea

1882

Returns to New York; continues working on English subjects

1883

Settles permanently at Prout’s Neck, Maine

1884

Begins regular winter trips to the tropics (the Bahamas, Florida, Cuba, and Bermuda)

1889

Begins regular visits to the Adirondacks to fish and paint

1894

Exhibits 15 paintings at the Chicago World’s Fair; awarded gold medal

1900

Awarded gold medal at the Paris Exposition

1910

Dies in his Prout’s Neck studio at age 74

him he was comparatively indifferent to the ordinary and peaceful aspects of the ocean....But when the lowering clouds gathered above the horizon, and tumultuous waves ran along the rockbound coast and up the shelving, precipitous rocks, his interest became intense.”

THE TROPICS AND ADIRONDACKS

To escape the harsh Maine winters, Homer began traveling in 1884 to the tropics (Florida, Cuba, the Bahamas, and Bermuda), where, in response to the extraordinary light and color, he created dazzling watercolors distinguished by their spontaneity, freshness, and informal compositions. In scenes of sun-drenched harbors and shores, he often left parts of the white paper exposed to give a sense of the brilliant atmosphere. *Key West, Hauling Anchor* (fig. 8) exemplifies the remarkable confidence and freedom of handling in these late watercolors,



with details convincingly suggested but not literally described.

An avid fisherman, Homer also left Prout's Neck to explore the Adirondack Mountains. Using watercolor as his principal medium, he recorded the various pursuits of fishermen and hunters. These works celebrate the pleasures and beauty of life in the Adirondacks but also confront more brutal realities. In one series, Homer depicted a practice called hounding, in which dogs were used to drive deer into a lake; there the deer would be clubbed, shot, or drowned easily by hunters in boats. In *Sketch for "Hound and Hunter"* (fig. 9), a young boy struggles to secure the dead deer while also attending to his dog. It was an unusual subject that many found disturbing.



LATE PAINTINGS

Homer painted less frequently in the last decade of his life. The paintings he did produce, deepened by intimations of mortality, include some of the most complex pictures of his career. *Right and Left* (fig. 10), for instance, is at once a sporting picture and a tragic reflection on life and death. Two goldeneye ducks are represented at the moment when a hunter in a boat has fired at them; the gunfire is indicated by the flash of red in the background. With its unconventional point of view and diverse sources of inspiration ranging from Japanese art to popular hunting imagery, the painting summarizes the creative complexity of Homer's late style.

Although Homer avoided any discussion of the meaning of his art, the progression of his creative life attests to the presence of a rigorous, principled mind. Continuously refining his enterprise, Homer created work that was not only powerful in aesthetic terms but also movingly profound. Acclaimed at his death for his extraordinary achievements, Homer remains today among the most respected and admired figures in the history of American art.

Cover: *Blackboard* (detail), 1877, Gift (Partial and Promised) of Jo Ann and Julian Ganz Jr., in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art

1. *The Army of the Potomac—A Sharp-Shooter on Picket Duty*, published 1862, Avalon Fund

2. *The Dinner Horn (Blowing the Horn at Seaside)*, 1870, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

3. *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)*, 1873–1876, Gift of the W. L. and May T. Mellon Foundation

4. *The Sick Chicken*, 1874, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

5. *Sparrow Hall*, 1881–1882, John Wilmerding Collection

6. *Eight Bells*, 1887, Gift of John W. Beatty Jr.

7. *Incoming Tide, Scarborough, Maine*, 1883, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

8. *Key West, Hauling Anchor*, 1903, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

9. *Sketch for "Hound and Hunter,"* 1892, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

10. *Right and Left*, 1909, Gift of the Avalon Foundation

The exhibition has been organized by the National Gallery of Art.

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CHECKLIST OF WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

The Army of the Potomac—A Sharp-Shooter on Picket Duty (After Winslow Homer) published 1862, wood engraving on newsprint, Avalon Fund

Home, Sweet Home c. 1863, oil on canvas, Patrons' Permanent Fund

Soldier Taking Aim 1864, black and white chalk over graphite on paper, John Davis Hatch Collection, Avalon Fund

Zouave 1864, black and white chalk on paper, John Davis Hatch Collection, Avalon Fund

Study for "Army Boots" (verso) 1865, graphite and white chalk on paper, Gift of Dr. Edmund Louis Gray Zalinski II

Two of Sheridan's Scouts 1865, graphite on paper, Gift of Dr. Edmund Louis Gray Zalinski II

1860–1870 (After Winslow Homer) published 1870, wood engraving on newsprint, Avalon Fund

The Dinner Horn (Blowing the Horn at Seaside) 1870, oil on canvas, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Four Boys on a Beach c. 1873, graphite with watercolor and gouache on paper, John Davis Hatch Collection, Andrew W. Mellon Fund

Dad's Coming! 1873, oil on wood, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

"Dad's Coming!" (After Winslow Homer), published 1873, wood engraving on newsprint, Print Purchase Fund (Rosenwald Collection)

The Red School House 1873, oil on canvas, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Ship-Building, Gloucester Harbor (After Winslow Homer) published 1873, wood engraving on newsprint, Avalon Fund

Snap-the-Whip (After Winslow Homer) published 1873, wood engraving on newsprint, Avalon Fund

Breezing Up (A Fair Wind) 1873–1876, oil on canvas, Gift of the W. L. and May T. Mellon Foundation

Fresh Eggs 1874, watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

The Sick Chicken 1874, watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Autumn 1877, oil on canvas, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Blackboard 1877, watercolor on paper, Gift (Partial and Promised) of Jo Ann and Julian Ganz Jr., in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art

On the Stile c. 1878, watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Girl with Hay Rake 1878, watercolor on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

The Milk Maid 1878, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

On the Fence 1878, watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Warm Afternoon (Shepherdess) 1878, watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Breezing Up c. 1879, graphite highlighted with black crayon and white chalk on paper, John Davis Hatch Collection, Avalon Fund

On the Sands 1881, watercolor and gouache with pen and black ink over graphite on paper, Bequest of Julia B. Engel

Sparrow Hall c. 1881–1882, oil on canvas, John Wilmerding Collection

Girl Carrying a Basket 1882, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

Mending the Nets 1882, watercolor and gouache over graphite on paper, Bequest of Julia B. Engel

Incoming Tide, Scarborough, Maine 1883, watercolor on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

Danger 1883 and 1887, watercolor and gouache over graphite on paper, Bequest of Julia B. Engel

Native Huts, Nassau 1885, watercolor, graphite, and gouache on paper, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

Eight Bells 1887, etching, Gift of John W. Beatty Jr.

Hauling in the Nets 1887, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

Two Scouts 1887, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Nancy Voorhees, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art

Mending Nets 1888, etching, Gift of John W. Beatty Jr.

Saved 1889, etching, Gift of John W. Beatty Jr.

*The Lone Fisherman** 1889, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

On the Trail c. 1892, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

A Good Shot, Adirondacks 1892, watercolor on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

Hound and Hunter 1892, oil on canvas, Gift of Stephen C. Clark

Sketch for "Hound and Hunter" 1892, watercolor on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

Casting, Number Two 1894, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

Salt Kettle, Bermuda 1899, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

*The Rise** 1900, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

The Coming Storm 1901, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

Key West, Hauling Anchor 1903, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

Red Shirt, Homosassa, Florida 1904, watercolor over graphite on paper, Gift of Ruth K. Henschel in memory of her husband, Charles R. Henschel

Right and Left 1909, oil on canvas, Gift of the Avalon Foundation

Signature in Palette undated, pen and brown ink on paper, John Davis Hatch Collection

* *The Lone Fisherman* will replace *The Rise* on October 24, 2005, and will remain on view for the duration of the exhibition.

Winslow Homer in the National Gallery of Art

