

# WINSLOW HOMER

(1836 – 1910)

*Original paper prepared by Priscilla Adams, revised and updated by Pam Jelinek, October 1990 and by Susan Bartram, September 2002*

## Visual Aids:

### Large Reproductions

- Breezing Up*
- The Nooning*
- Boys in a Pasture*
- Sunset Fires*

### Small Prints

- The Gulf Stream*
- Salt Kettle Bermuda*
- Hound and Hunter*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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## INTRODUCTION

Winslow Homer (1836-1910) was an American artist who painted in both oils and watercolors. He had a long career, spanning the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and a large output of painting (685 watercolors and about 300 oil paintings). He is best known for his paintings of the sea and the men and women who got their living from the sea, whom he showed as rugged and heroic. However, he began his career as an artist illustrating Civil War battlefield scenes for Harper's Weekly. He then began to paint in oils, concentrating on scenes of farm and country life, especially children. Only later in his career did the sea become the focus of many of his paintings.

Homer is regarded as one of the first American masters of realism, because he painted scenes exactly as he saw them, without romanticizing them or trying to make them prettier than they were. He didn't try to convey people's emotions or try to tell a story; he simply showed life as it was. Homer's paintings are so lifelike that one tends to forget that he was also a great color theorizer. He did not often speak about art, but he did remark: "You can't get along without a knowledge of the principles and rules governing the influence of one color upon another. A mechanic might as well try to get along without tools."

In presenting the art of Winslow Homer, it might be best to focus on the kinds of subjects that Homer liked to paint and the emotional tone created by the different paintings. Additionally, you should talk about Homer's use of complementary colors, his use of the full spectrum of colors from white to black, his strong use of lines, his realism and the evolution of his watercolor techniques. He was the first American artist to make watercolor an important art form.

## BACKGROUND OF THE ARTIST

Winslow Homer was born in Boston on February 24, 1836. His father was an importer of hardware. His mother was an accomplished amateur watercolorist known for her paintings of flowers and birds. He had two brothers, Charles and Arthur. As children in Cambridge, Massachusetts, they loved to swim hunt and fish. Winslow developed a passion for a solitary outdoor life.

At the age of 18, having expressed little interest in college and a great one in painting, his father apprenticed him to a well-known print-maker in Boston. Winslow disliked the long hours indoors and when his two year apprenticeship was over he quit and began to do illustrations for several magazines.

At the age of 24, he moved to New York to be in the center of the art and publishing worlds. He had a studio there but returned to the New England countryside in the summer to be with his family. He was offered a staff job at Harper's Weekly magazine but declined it and never in his life would he consent to work for anyone

other than himself. During this time Winslow concentrated on drawings of contemporary scenes of fashionable past-time and scenes of children.

When the Civil War broke out, Winslow was sent to Virginia by Harper's Weekly. He drew pictures of soldiers, camp life and the occasional battle although he himself preferred to record scenes of daily life. His sketches provide an authentic record of how the Civil War soldier looked and acted.

Winslow began painting seriously at the age of 26. He was almost completely self-taught, although he did attend classes at the National Academy of Design at night for two years. When two of his early oil paintings were exhibited at the National Academy, he vowed that if they didn't sell, he would give up painting for good. His brother Charles secretly arranged to buy the paintings. Winslow didn't find out for many years that the "anonymous collector" was actually his brother.

One of Homer's favorite subjects for painting was children. Although he never married or had children of his own, he loved and understood young people. He sketched and painted many scenes of children running and playing games.

Some critics found Homer's work to be quite radical. He was one of the first American artists to paint scenes and people exactly as he saw them. He never tried to make them more attractive than they were. The public responded favorably to his pictures and they usually sold quickly. Homer's watercolors seemed to be more popular than his oils, which some critics considered unrefined and lacking in finish.

In 1866, Homer went to Paris for 10 months. He visited the World's Fair where his famous Civil War picture, *Prisoners from the Front*, was on exhibit. There is no record of whether or not he met any of the Impressionists who were working around Paris at the time. Homer was little influenced by other artists and looked more at nature than at other men's art.

Like the French Impressionists, Homer preferred to work out of doors. He was one of the first American painters to do so. He was interested in the special effects of light and color as seen outside.

Homer was also interested in the concept of painting as a form of decoration. Although his style was realistic, he liked to create abstract patterns with his lines, shapes and colors. This decorative quality is similar to Japanese art, which may have influenced him. His friend, painter John La Farge, was one of America's first collectors of Japanese prints.

In 1881, when he was forty-five and a successful, well-established painter, Homer decided he needed to go away by himself to search for deeper meaning in his painting. He went to stay in Tynemouth, a small town in England on the North Sea coast. In the two years he was there, his painting changed from recording the sunbathers of the beach to recording nature and weather and its effect on the sea and

its nearby inhabitants. In his earlier pictures, weather had been seen as something static or unchanging.

He found inspiration in the people of the fishing community. They were hard-working people who made their living from the sea. He made many paintings of women, not dainty, decorative types as before but sturdy, strong-minded women, capable of doing a man's work. Homer did many watercolors while living at Tynemouth and perfected his technique of the genre.

Upon his return to the United States two years later, Homer searched for a place to settle which would provide him with the same relationship with nature. He settled in Prout's Neck, Maine where his family built a home high on a cliff overlooking the sea. Homer remodeled a stable into a studio home for himself and lived there for the rest of his life. During his later years he would spend the winters vacationing in Florida, Bermuda or the Caribbean. He began to paint watercolors in a new way, directly with his brushes, without making a drawing first. He used fatter brushes, broader strokes, and brighter colors. *Sunset Fires* is an example of this new style.

In 1908, at the age of 72, Homer suffered a slight stroke. He was slowing down and had not painted much for several years. He died in 1910 and was buried in Cambridge.

Homer was a prolific artist. There are 685 known watercolors painted between 1873-1905. He left about 300 oil paintings. Many of his watercolors were early studies for his later oil paintings.

## LARGE VISUALS

***Breezing Up*** (1876, oil on canvas, 24"x38", National Gallery of Art)

Homer's inspiration for *Breezing Up* came from a summer visit to Gloucester, Maine. The painting portrays a familiar phase of the daily life that Homer witnessed from along the New England seacoast. He worked on this canvas intermittently for three years, producing preliminary studies in pencil and watercolor. He continued to revise the composition. The distant schooner was originally larger and closer to the center of the picture. The angle of the mast was made steeper to increase the diagonal movement, and another boy once sat on the bow where the anchor now is.

### Questions to ask:

1. What is happening in this picture? What have these people been doing? (A bearded skipper accompanied by three boys, steers his boat toward port – note the distant light house in the small print version of this painting. They have been fishing – note the day's catch stowed in the cockpit.)

2. Which way is the wind blowing? How can you tell? (Flag on the schooner in the background, the full sails, the way the catboat is heeled over so the lee rail is awash, and the placement of the people to counteract the effect of the wind)
3. What clues are there about the weather and the time of day? (Fish in the cockpit indicate they have been sailing for a while. Lack of coats and shoes indicate warm weather. Warmth of light across clouds, figures and sail suggests late afternoon.)
4. Who is steering the boat, and how?
5. Why does the artist have the boat partly off the canvas? Would the painting be more or less interesting if the boat were centered? (He worked on the painting for three years, so obviously he didn't just accidentally run out of space. Discuss asymmetrical balance of the painting)
6. Does Homer use a lot of colors? Do you see any use of complementary colors? (Orange shirt of old man contrasts with the ocean blue. Skin tones also provide warm contrast against the cool colors of the sky.)
7. Is there a sense of motion in the painting? How is that conveyed to us? (Strong diagonals, wake behind the boat)
8. Does the picture tell a story? (No story being told or sentimental feeling being portrayed as in "traditional" painting of the time but conveys natural feeling of the situation)
9. Are the boys relaxed or tense? Are they interacting? (They look relaxed, somewhat detached from one another, absorbed in their own thoughts)
10. Does the painting provide detail or is it just an impression of something? (Homer described his painting method: "When I have selected the thing carefully, I paint it exactly as it appears". In this painting, this realism is found in the careful depiction of objects such as clothing and the rigging.)
11. How is color used to show bright sunlight? (Homer used warm ochers in the illuminated areas of the sail and hats and eliminated middle tones to emphasize the contrast between light and shadow.)

***The Nooning*** (1876, oil on canvas, 13” x 9”, Wadsworth Museum, Hartford CT)

This painting is typical of many Homer painted after the Civil War, showing life at its simplest.

**Questions to ask:**

1. What is happening in this picture? (See if they notice the dog next to the boy)
2. How does it make you feel?
3. How does the boy feel? Why do you think that?
4. Where is this yard? What makes you think that?
5. Is it realistic? In what way?
6. Why is it called *The Nooning*?
7. What do you think happened right before? Right after?
8. Where is the light coming from? (Get them to look at shadows and color)
9. How does Homer use color in this painting?

***Boys in a Pasture*** (1874, Oil on canvas, Boston Museum of Fine Arts)

This is another painting by Homer of children in a field. They are surrounded by large areas of nature; the focus is not necessarily the children but the world around them. The children are treated with respect—these are honest, not stylized portraits. Like *Breezing Up* emotions are not relayed through their expressions. Use questions similar to *The Nooning*. See if they can identify a possible time of day and have them try and justify their answers. How is line used to convey mood? (strong horizontals convey calmness)

***Sunset Fires*** (1880, Watercolor, Westmoreland Museum of Art, Greensburg, PA)

This painting is typical of the later watercolor style of Winslow Homer. It is quickly painted, with few pencil lines visible. The paint does not completely cover the paper. Some white paint has been applied, in the sky near the schooner, but for the most part the white spaces come from absence of paint. Ask what colors they see? (Note that as you look at the painting, you gradually see more colors emerging.) How do we know what time of day it is? Again, note the strong horizontal lines and the calmness this

conveys. If you haven't already done so, this is a good time to discuss Homer's importance as a watercolorist.

## SMALL VISUALS

*Hound and Hunter* (1892, oil on canvas based on a previous watercolor, 28"/48", National Gallery)

Homer repainted the deer's head to lie lower in the water because people thought he was depicting a hunter drowning a deer. The hunter appears anxious and concerned about the dog. The somewhat sinister subject is suggested by both the rifle and the dead tree in the right rear.

*The Gulf Stream* (1889, Oil on canvas, 28" x 49", New York Metropolitan Museum of Art) Painted near the end of his career, this is one of Homer's most famous oil paintings. A ship-wrecked sailor lies on the deck of his mastless boat, surrounded by sharks. Again, here the emphasis is on the violence and drama of the sea. When the painting was displayed in New York, many viewers complained that the painting was too violent. The exasperated artist wrote to his dealer: "The criticisms. . .by old women and others are noted. You may inform these people that [the sailor] did not starve to death. He was rescued by a passing ship."

*Salt Kettle, Bermuda* (1899, watercolor over graphite, 14" x 21", National Gallery)

## PROJECT IDEA

**Watercolor painting of a seascape\***. Ask the children to keep in mind when creating their paintings that Winslow Homer was a realist, and used realistic colors and light. Use as models the reproductions you have brought in, or possibly calendar or magazine pictures for other ideas of what might be included in a seascape. You may need to remind the class how to use watercolors, especially remembering to rinse their brush before changing colors. Sketching lightly with pencil before painting is a good idea. Use only the tip of the brush, and press lightly for a thin line, or with more pressure for a thick line. They might want to try using different size brushes, to see how that affects their painting. Provide absorbent paper towels, to allow the children to wet areas of the paper and/or blot up excess paint in areas they wish to lighten.

*\*Special watercolor paper is available in the Art Appreciation supply closet for this project – it is expensive, so caution the children to think and plan before they get started. It is heavier than drawing paper so that it can absorb water with very little wrinkling. It has a textured surface, which allows the artist to achieve a variety of effects with a single brush. There is only enough paper for one sheet per child.*