



*Winslow Homer
and the Poetics of Place*

The connection between Winslow Homer (1836–1910) and the Portland Museum of Art is long-standing and intimate. Homer exhibited at the museum in his lifetime, and through the course of the twentieth century the PMA has become a symbolic home for the artist. *Winslow Homer and the Poetics of Place* commemorates the centennial of Homer's death and is the first time since 1988 that the PMA's entire collection of his work will be on view at once.

Winslow Homer lived during a time that saw the United States grow from a young country of small towns to a modern industrial nation. Throughout his lengthy career as a graphic artist, genre painter, and chronicler of the rugged Maine coast, Homer provided the nation with images that helped create a sense of place in an era of rapid change and growth. In particular, Homer's uninhabited images of crashing waves, moody and existential, created a new way of looking at the Atlantic that proved popular to the generation of artists who followed the painter to Maine.

The exhibition features works that are considered to be national treasures, such as *Artists Sketching in the White Mountains* (1868) and *Weatherbeaten* (1894), as well as *Sharpshooter* (1863), Homer's first oil painting. The fourteen watercolors, rarely seen due to their fragility and sensitivity to light, are a revelation for their pristine color. The exhibition also marks the debut of a groundbreaking online resource, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Maine Humanities Council, for the study of Homer's extensive body of graphic works. The PMA is home to the Peggy and Harold Osher Collection, a comprehensive gathering of Homer's wood engravings from popular magazines and publications of the second half of the nineteenth century, and this resource will be made available to a national audience. >>>



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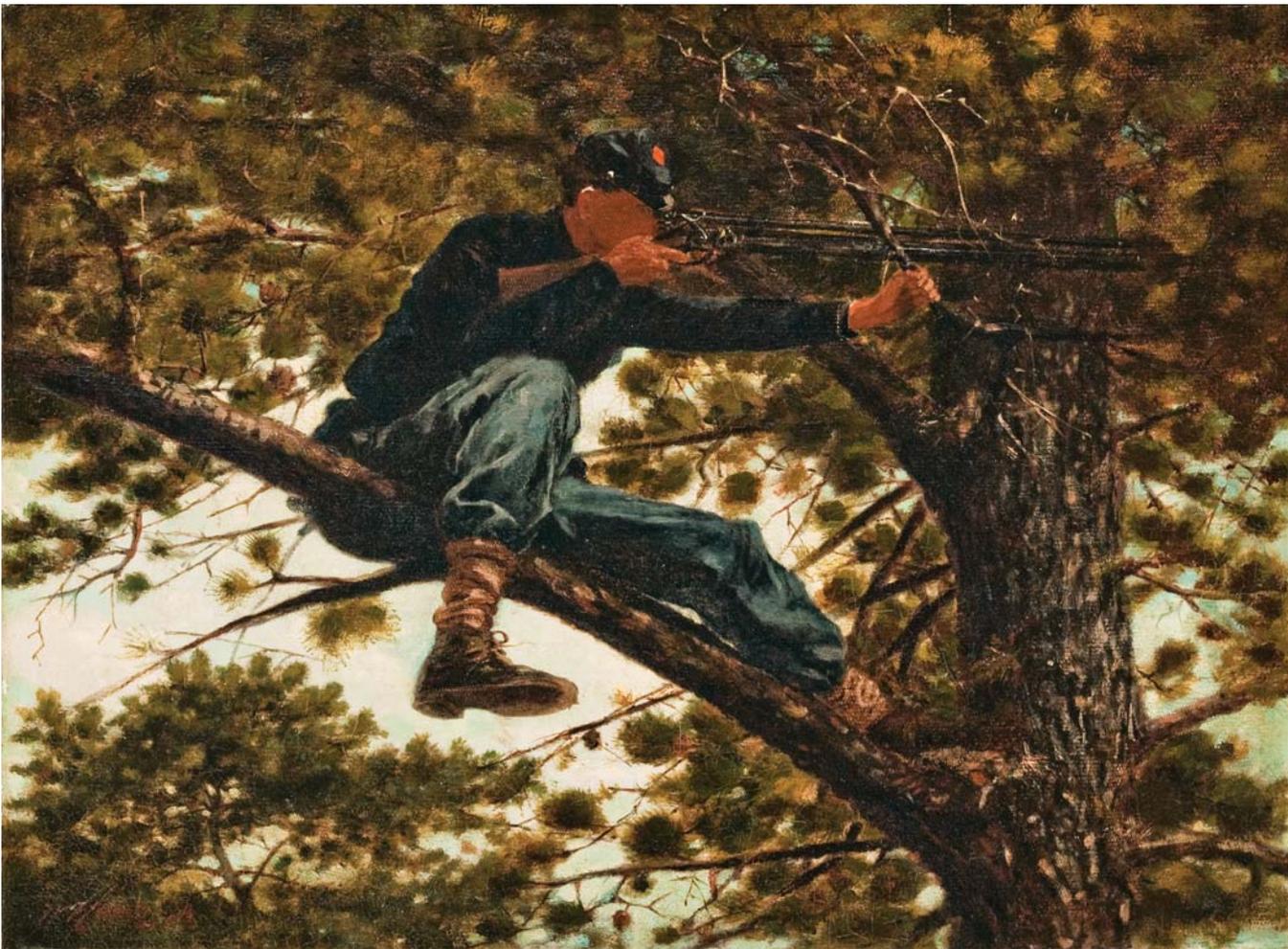
Winslow Homer (1836–1910)

(detail) *Artists Sketching in the White Mountains*, 1868

Oil on panel, 9½ x 15⅞ inches

Bequest of Charles Shipman Payson, 1988.55.4

The White Mountains served as a national landscape in the years that followed the Civil War. One of the first regions to engender and exploit a tourist economy in the United States, the towns surrounding the Presidential Range of New Hampshire provided the infrastructure for a generation of artists to capture the view while taking in the fresh air of the country. Painting Mount Washington, the highest peak in the range, came to be considered a rite of passage for artists of every stripe. Homer—ironic in temperament and possessing a keen, self-deprecating sense of humor—took obvious pleasure in depicting himself as last in this queue of plein-air painters as evidenced by the knapsack bearing the inscription “Homer.” Although Homer would continue to paint genre subjects throughout the 1870s, the subtle critique evidenced in *Artists Sketching in the White Mountains* would eventually lead him to darker, existential dramas.



Winslow Homer (1836–1910)

Sharpshooter, 1863

Oil on canvas, 12¼ x 16½ inches

Gift of Barbro and Bernard Osher, 1992.41

Closely cropped and devoid of the heroic conventions of nineteenth-century military pomp, Winslow Homer’s remarkable debut in oil is a novel painting of a modern war. A product of Homer’s firsthand experiences at the front, the inherent tension of the image derives from the painter’s ability to essentialize a soldier engaged in the specific act of targeting a chosen adversary. The painting is at once about the universality of faceless death in war and the precision of killing. The discomfort provoked by this contradiction transcends time and elicits a chill today as it did when Homer himself wrote that such activity was “as near murder” as he could imagine.



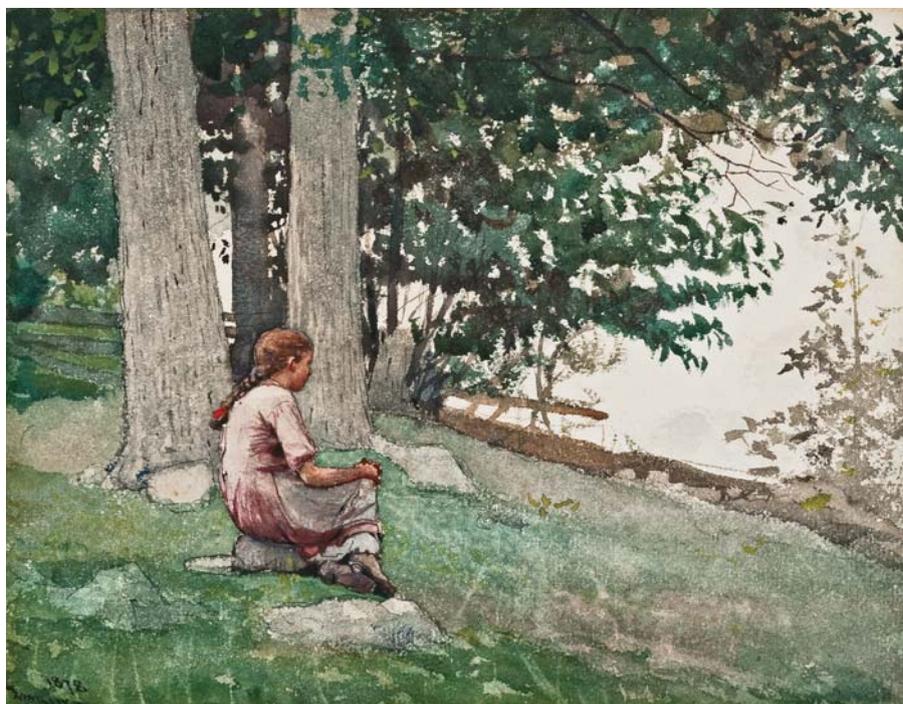
Winslow Homer (1836–1910)

Boy in a Boatyard, 1873

Watercolor and gouache over graphite on off-white wove paper, 7½ x 13⅝ inches

Bequest of Charles Shipman Payson, 1988.55.5

Homer's genius lay in his ability not only to depict place but also to convey sensation. A hot sun, having bleached the shingles of the boathouse and dried out the barrel staves and wooden casks littering the yard, warms the brow of boy and viewer alike. Remarkably, *Boy in a Boatyard* is the product of Homer's first summer of intensive work in watercolor. Despite the novelty of the medium to the artist, the painting displays a confidence of technique readily seen in the contrast between the bright, drying sail and the moody shadows. The solitary child is a motif that Homer repeated in the 1870s, perhaps as a surrogate for his own desire to retreat from society.



Winslow Homer (1836–1910)

Girl Seated on Hillside

Overlooking the Water, 1878

Watercolor and graphite on paper,

8¾ x 11⅝ inches

Gift of Lily W. Russell and Family, 1998.28

Images of children enjoyed great currency in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As the United States celebrated its centennial and prepared to step out onto the world stage as an international power, nostalgic views of rural life and the innocence of youth served as visual substitutes for conversations about change and modernity. Painted in 1878 during Homer's stay at Houghton Farm—the summer home of Lawson and Lucy Valentine in Montville, New York—this scene depicts a girl on the cusp of adolescence, singular and alone, staring into a mirrorlike lake. Her head is turned away from the picture plane, hiding her features and rendering her universal. She is lent character by a bright red ribbon in her long braid—the small flash of color a device favored by Homer. A symbol of the young nation, she pensively looks into a bright, but opaque, future.



Winslow Homer (1836-1910)

Trappers Resting, 1874

Watercolor on wove paper, 9¾ x 13¾ inches

Bequest of Charles Shipman Payson, 1988.55.6

Winslow Homer took to the woods and in so doing changed the way Americans looked at their environment. He traveled to the Adirondacks of New York for the first time in 1870, sketching, painting, and producing illustrations of this planned wilderness for the popular journals *Every Saturday* and *Harper's Weekly*. He returned repeatedly and, over time, developed relationships with the hired hands and guides of the North Woods Club. *Trappers Resting* is a document of Homer's passionate interest in the rugged, outdoor life and stands as a wistful icon of traditional labor in an ever-changing and increasingly fast-paced world.



Winslow Homer (1836–1910)
Windy Day, Cullercoats, 1881
Graphite and gouache on tan laid paper, 11 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 20 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
Bequest of Charles Shipman Payson, 1988.55.15

Homer's sense of bravado, previously restrained in his works by his fondness for irony, is on full display in *Windy Day, Cullercoats*. The product of the artist's eighteen-month stay on the North Sea, drawings such as this reflect Homer's search for authentic experience in everyday life. Impressed by the hearty women of this fishing village in the northeast of England, time and again he captured the strength and capability of these archetypes of traditional female labor. Homer sketched this model from a low angle, creating a dramatic sense of perspective that renders the figure heroic.

Homer's refined eye can be seen in how he delineates the arch of the woman's back, leaning away from the wind just as the mast of the vessel strains against the sail. Her billowing apron demonstrates the force of nature buffeting the fleet heading to sea in the background. With sleeves rolled up and market basket at the hip, Homer's figure is muscular, capable, and self-contained in the face of a rugged and challenging environment. Homer's technical genius is revealed not only in his forceful draftsmanship but also in his exquisite use of negative space.



Winslow Homer (1836–1910)
Bringing in the Nets, 1887
Watercolor on paper, 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
Bequest of Charles Shipman Payson, 1988.55.14

Painted some five years after Homer's return from his English sojourn, this American scene but faintly echoes his earlier explorations of the nobility of taking sustenance from the sea. In this later work, the fisherman is up to his knees in high tide, bent over by his burden, and all but tangled himself in marsh grass. Great houses on the horizon reinforce the man's station in life, in contrast to the earlier watercolors, wherein Homer depicted the simple English fisherfolk of Cullercoats as a natural royalty.



Winslow Homer (1836–1910)
Leaping Trout, 1889
Watercolor on paper, 14 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 20 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches
Bequest of Charles Shipman Payson, 1988.55.7

Winslow Homer's credentials as a sportsman were well established by the time he returned to the Adirondacks in 1889. A seasoned and savvy fisherman, he had experience angling around the world and particularly enjoyed casting for brook trout with his brother Charles at the North Woods Club in Minerva, New York. Homer stayed at the club in 1889 for almost four months. The artist's firsthand knowledge of the feeding habits of trout and his keen ability to depict a fish rising to take the fly have made his Adirondack scenes canonical images in the history of American sport.



Winslow Homer (1836–1910)
Two Men in a Canoe, 1895
Watercolor on gray laid paper, 14 x 20 inches
Bequest of Charles Shipman Payson, 1988.55.12

Homer's ability to depict quiescence rivaled his skill at capturing the raw force of nature. Painted on one of Homer's late visits to Canada, *Two Men in a Canoe* is a study in subtlety and technique. The artist employs the paper itself to color both water and sky, splitting earth and heaven with deft, minimal brush strokes to create the shore out of misty wash. The canoe's silent wake and the whip of the fishing line—both rendered in pure white gouache—testify to Homer's ability to produce watercolors that all but make sound.



Winslow Homer (1836–1910)
Weatherbeaten, 1894
Oil on canvas, 28½ x 48¾ inches
Bequest of Charles Shipman Payson, 1988.55.1

Late in life, Homer turned his hand to the timeless drama of the Atlantic Ocean. His paintings of the 1890s are archetypes of close observation and direct experience, the product of a decade of living and painting at Prouts Neck, Maine. These dark paintings—forceful, poetic, and exhibiting an intimate knowledge of the sea in its many moods—redirected popular attention to the coast and repositioned New England as a final frontier. With the American West declared closed by historian Frederick Jackson Turner the previous year, Homer's *Weatherbeaten* is an existential manifesto about the challenges of nature in the modern world. The wilderness, long a westerly ideal in the collective memory of the United States, is relocated to a timeless place where the waves of the Atlantic strike the Eastern Seaboard.



Winslow Homer (1836–1910)
Wild Geese in Flight, 1897
Oil on canvas, 33¾ x 49¾ inches
Bequest of Charles Shipman Payson, 1988.55.2

The first owner of *Wild Geese in Flight* insisted later in life that the painting originally bore the title *At the Foot of the Lighthouse*. This shift in identification is telling, for it changes the image from a hunting scene with connotations of the sporting life and perhaps providing for human sustenance to a painting of caprice as the chance encounter with a lighthouse claims the geese without reason. The unseen navigational aid ironically becomes as fatal as bird shot from a hunter's blind. [AFA](#)

On view through September 6, 2010, and organized by the Portland Museum of Art, *Winslow Homer and the Poetics of Place* is accompanied by an elegant catalogue available in the museum store. For more information call 207.775.6148 or visit www.portlandmuseum.org.

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