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Winslow Homer and *The Gulf Stream*

By Erin Lippitz

Winslow Homer was an artist of amazing breadth with a varied and wide range of subject matter and style. Homer depicted frontline Civil War soldiers, the bourgeois class in the Gilded Age, black sharecroppers in the south during Reconstruction and lonely stretches of the New England coast. These popular themes gave Homer's work a modern feel; he gave irony to popular art, he added psychological depth to his narratives and he depicted landscapes with a personal edge (Cotter 55). Although Homer created realist paintings, he was, early in his career, essentially a figure painter. The early Homer focused on human forms, which were the center of his artwork, while the setting was secondary. As his work and style progressed, these figures disappeared altogether from his work and Homer began focusing on the landscape, mainly the sea.

During the Civil War, Homer was working as a free-lance magazine illustrator and artist-reporter in New York while studying painting on the side at the National Academy of Design. He was given an assignment as war correspondent by Harper's Weekly and was sent to the Virginia front. Homer made sketches from life in the Union camps and later turned them into illustrations. Because of his work for the magazine, Homer's first works were basically pictures of war, yet instead of showing men actually fighting, he chose to depict life in the camps at the edge of war. The soldiers Homer depicted do not display courage or fear but boredom and sadness. Death was not addressed. It was this realism that distinguished Homer from the mainstream painters of the day. No other artist left so authentic a record of how the Civil War soldier looked and acted (Goodrich, Great 13). He saw things in American life that no other artist had seen and he painted them in new ways.

After the war Homer turned towards depicting civilian life and it is for this that he is known. He captured moments in American life by painting ordinary citizens. Most often Homer painted those subjects

ignored by his contemporaries: women, children and African Americans. This work from the late 1860s and 70s forms almost a social history of the nation. His early work is a broad picture of American society; he made no judgements but simply contrasted different ways of life. K. Chowder explains Homer's eagerness to depict traditional American life; "Perhaps he shared the national longing for the age of innocence, before blood was shed in the Civil War, when America was still rural, untainted by industrialization and urbanization" (120). Homer combined these aspects of nature and humanity with a naturalism that was native and personal and depicted them with a fresh outlook; thus, he appeals equally to the artist and the layman.

While Homer was creating his American histories, the art world was still ruled by the romanticism of the Hudson River School. While Homer's generation turned towards Europe, Homer drew almost all his material from the American scene. Homer was never influenced by anyone else's work; in fact, he once stated, "If a man wants to be an artist he should never look at pictures" (qtd. in Chowder 120). It is difficult to detect any one particular influence of a painter or school in Homer's early work. His style was more closely based on nature than other art; he was concerned with man and his relation to nature and eventually became the greatest painter of the outdoor world. He simply painted, with an innocent eye, what he saw: "When I have selected the thing carefully, I paint it exactly as it appears" (qtd. in Goodrich, Great 26). His philosophy seems to have been completely naturalistic, that painting was a realistic representation of nature. It is clear, though, that Homer added stronger realism and deeper emotional content to his works while continuing in the native genre tradition.

Homer was one of the first to get away from the Hudson River School studio conventions and to capture light and color as it appeared to the eye. From the beginning of his career he did much of his work outdoors. Between 1865-1866, Homer turned his eye toward Europe and the works executed in this time reflect the models of Boudin and the young Monet and their emphasis on the effect of light on a subject. Homer saw things in broad masses of light and color and he painted what he saw. To him, light and its effect on the object were almost as important as the object itself, though the object did remain central. No

matter how object or figure oriented Homer's work was, he always retained a feeling for the purely physical appeal of color, pigment, and line and the patterns they created (Goodrich, Great 17). Often, as Homer worked on a canvas he deleted details to heighten the essential meaning of the painting. In these ways Homer can be compared to the French Impressionists. Homer and the Impressionists shared interests in outdoor light and its effect on an object as well as some of the same stylisms such as the simplified massing of lights and shadows. According to Cotter, "[t]he Impressionists used paint as a kind of molecular dispersal, turning nature into evanescence, a relativity of changing light. Part of the perennial appeal of that work, surely, is its insubstantiality, its sustained intoxication with beauty" (56). Homer's work was appealing to the American public in its truthful depictions of the American scene as well as its closeness to the popular Impressionistic works of the time.

Homer's work up to 1879 forms a social history of America but his late work is almost an opposite; Chowder describes these paintings as personal visions of the eternal human predicament and the pathetic vulnerability of all life in the face of death (126). Homer's work had evolved from a vision of sunny, cheerful America to a lonely universe of elemental conflict, isolation, danger and death. In these later works the human figure is at the mercy of nature, beneath it, and overpowered by it. Nicolai Cikovsky attributes this change in part to a growing distaste for American values in a time of political corruption and money-lust (qtd. in Chowder 123). It is clear that around 1880 a trauma of some kind occurred in Homer's life and altered it. In many of Homer's works after this crisis, death is an immense presence.

In 1880, Homer made a trip to Europe that had a profound effect on his art. He settled in the English fishing village of Cullercoats arriving just in time for the "serious" seasons of autumn and winter when the weather was stormy and the sea was at its most dangerous. Here he worked almost entirely in watercolors and first began painting the sea and the men and women who lived near it. These first works were a series of pictures dealing with the hard and dangerous lives of these men and women. The central theme was the peril of the sea and the drama of the struggle against it. Homer's style underwent a great change at this point. His figures grew rounder and fuller, in fact, in

painting after painting his women appear Athena-like striding across the beach. Homer also began using more deep and subtle color, giving his canvas a more atmospheric effect. The sea is present in all of these paintings, calm or turbulent, but it is the human grandeur that Homer idealizes in his figures that stands between the painter and the sea.

When Homer returned to New York in 1882, he brought with him the dramatic ambience of Cullercoats and began to translate it into sea rescue paintings with American themes. In most of these similarly themed works, the gazes of the protagonists rarely meet, which creates a strange image. The faces of the women are typically obscured and their state is unclear as well as the identity of their rescuers. The women still retain the Athena-like quality as seen in Homer's work done in Cullercoats, yet at the mercy of the raging sea they are helpless. Homer offers these fragments of the narrative, never finishing the story, and thus teases the viewer. Many of these same qualities can be seen in a later work, *The Gulf Stream*, and will be discussed at a later point.

Homer eventually settled back in the United States in Prout's Neck and built a studio overlooking the ocean that would be his home for the remainder of his life. Homer turned his back on the modern world and escaped from contemporary society. He lived alone but stated that his new life was genuinely satisfying: "This is the only life in which I am permitted to mind my own business ... I am perfectly happy and contented" (qtd. in Goodrich, Great 22). Homer had a portable studio built, a little house on runners that he could move close to the sea yet be protected from human intrusion. It is here in 1890 that Homer began his simplest works: he began to paint seascapes, many of which were depicted without figures. These paintings are simply the sea and the earth shown in a perpetual battle of waves against rock. Chowder describes these pictures not as a world without people but a world in which the painter is at long last alone with the sea (128).

Homer's closeness with the ocean further changed his art. In his Prout's Neck paintings the human figures gradually retreat from the scene and the tone becomes famously pessimistic. His style becomes stronger, more masculine, and more skillful while the scale of his pictures becomes larger. The dominant theme becomes the sea, and the drama of man/woman's struggle against it is replaced by the drama of the ocean itself. It was the sea at its stormiest that he loved and it was

the power and the danger of the sea that moved him. These scenes are realistic and immediately vivid in their impact. The works in which the story was expressed in pictorial terms are Homer's most dramatic; the most melodramatic and lurid of which is *The Gulf Stream* painted in 1899.

The Gulf Stream, begun in the months following his father's death, is probably Homer's most famous painting and his strongest version of his favorite theme of the perils of the sea. This work returns to the storytelling technique of his earlier paintings but is completely a product of Homer's late style (Flexner 172). There is no doubt about what is happening in the picture. A single black man on a dismasted boat faces death in several forms: hunger, thirst, circling sharks, waves and even a waterspout. In the distance, a ship passes by under full sail, oblivious to the victim, as the Gulf Stream carries the stranded man further out to sea. The man himself seems unaware of his possible rescue and appears to have resigned himself to his imminent death. Yet in the face of all this disaster, the man retains a certain dignity; he does not seem to ask for an end to his isolation and he does not ask to live. This painting is less heroic and more realistic than Homer's earlier perils-of-the-sea works; there is no dramatic rescue here, there is no fight for life, and the man's fate has neither explanation nor logic.

The Gulf Stream is a storytelling picture and is a supreme example of the dramatic tease that was Homer's specialty. Homer freezes the narrative before a resolution can be reached but leaves the construction of the story to the spectator. Homer has chosen an unusual subject and has placed him in a particularly enigmatic and tantalizing episode while leaving a few significant details for the viewer to pick up: the sheared off mast, bright red flecks of blood on the water and the thrashing sharks all build a story which the viewer is expected to end. It is up to the viewer to decide in which direction the victim's fate lies.

Although the sea appears to have condemned this man to die, he still maintains strength and power. Much like Homer's Athena-like women from Cullercoats, the sailor is physically strong and seems almost unflappable in his position on the boat. He is stoic, dazed and faces away from his danger, seeming to embody man's will to endure against the most terrible odds. He has accepted his fate and he does not fight against it. It is here that the viewer realizes that only against such

forces of nature is this sailor helpless.

The Gulf Stream is a strong canvas for Homer and bears resemblance to one other work with a similar theme, *The Slave Ship* by Joseph Turner. These two works deal with contemporary events and put man against the sea. The paintings use the unfinished story technique to draw the viewer into the works and to encourage them to finish the story on their own; both contain similar elements. For example, the thrashing sharks present a very real and immediate danger to the black men in both pieces. The blood in the water in *The Gulf Stream* suggests that someone has already been killed. Whereas the unfortunate sailors in *The Slave Ship* have been thrown overboard and have no hope of surviving against the piranha-like fish, the subject in *The Gulf Stream* heroically clings to life despite his terrible odds. Both works use vigorous brushstrokes giving the paintings an atmospheric setting to convey the tense and emotional predicament in which the sailors are caught. Both artists rely on color as well to present aspects of the story, with the color red standing out. Turner's use of red in the sky and water gives the piece a sense of the sublime and almost sets the background aflame. It is clear then from this type of rendering that this piece is not meant to appear hopeful. The slaves have been left and the ship shows no sign of returning. Homer uses red in a more subtle manner, placing it around the sharks to create one facet of the story and placing a few red slashes across the back of the small boat giving the story an added twist. Unlike Turner, Homer leaves a small sense of hope in his painting—the setting is beautiful for this sailor and in the distance a tiny ship appears, which one can only hope is headed in the direction of the stranded sailor. Although Homer does leave a glimmer of hope he also creates an ironic scene for his sailor by putting him in the beautiful light of the Gulf but leaving the danger to be read from the menacing sharks and the approaching waterspout.

By Victorian standards, Homer's content was deemed vulgar, as it lacked the polite elegance of the day. Those who at the time still accepted the smooth finish of traditional oil paintings regarded Homer's vigorous brushstrokes as crude and completely missed their expressive qualities and appropriateness to his theme. Homer rendered *The Gulf Stream* as a very technical piece. The boat is tipped sharply, forming a diagonal that should pull the observer directly into the picture, but the

sailor is cut off from the viewer by dark, choppy waves in the foreground. Homer used violent brushstrokes to create the dangerous atmosphere and to give the viewer a sense of urgency. Although his form in this piece was admired for its resemblance to photographic naturalism, these essences of Homer's artistry were completely overlooked. When *The Gulf Stream* was first exhibited many found the subject matter brutal and one critic even went so far as to request from Homer an explanation for his painting. Homer wrote in 1902, "You ask me for a full description of my picture of the Gulf Stream. I regret very much that I have painted a picture that requires any description. You can tell these ladies that the unfortunate Negro who now is so dazed and parboiled will be rescued and returned to his friends and home and ever after live happily" (qtd. in Goodrich, Homer 162)

Homer may be known for his pastoral country life scenes of an early America, but what he is most famous for is his astounding painting *The Gulf Stream*. There is little doubt that this painting will retain its powerful fascination and remain popular year after year. This piece is his culminating masterpiece; the power of his brushstrokes alone makes it one of his greatest technical achievements. The Evening Post called *The Gulf Stream* "that rare thing in these days, a great dramatic picture, partly because every object in the picture receives a sort of overall emphasis that shows no favor to the dramatic passages. As a result the story never outweighs the artistic interest" (qtd. in Goodrich, Homer 170). *The Gulf Stream* returns to Homer's famous perils of the sea theme and pits man against the mercy of nature but above all this painting is a beautiful portrait of the sea.

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