

# Universal Values in Distinctly American Settings

The National Gallery of Art, and curators Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr. and Franklin Kelly, have done a great service to the public by mounting a comprehensive exhibition of the art of the American painter Winslow Homer. Only by viewing the breadth of his work, can one come to appreciate the republican and universal quality of Homer's art.

It is Homer's use of metaphor that lifts him above any other American painter known to this reviewer. Far from being a realist—as he has been reputed to be until recently—Homer continually challenges the viewer to see beyond the literal images he paints.

The exhibition shows nearly 250 of his works, beginning with early Civil War paintings, produced in a career that spanned more than a half-century. The pictures are full of information about American life, but "information" is not what the pictures are about. They are about universal human values, shown in distinctly American settings.

## Turbulent America

Winslow Homer was born in Boston in 1836, and died in 1910. His life spanned the most turbulent period of national history: the Civil War; the triumph of the principles of our Declaration of Independence, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights"; Lincoln's establishing, simultaneous with the War, the great motor of American industrial development, in order to fulfill the preamble of the Constitution to "promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty"; and the sad denouement of those promises, the notable turning point being the assassination of William McKinley and the accession in 1901 of anglophile Theodore Roosevelt to the American presidency.

Homer's art was informed and shaped by the Civil War. While still a



"The Veteran in a New Field," 1865

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

young engraver, he was sent to the front by his employer, *Harper's Weekly* magazine. There he began the process of learning to be a great painter (he was largely self-taught), not just in technique, but in making apparent to his viewers his clear sense of nation and social justice. While his compositions are undeniably visually beautiful, beauty could not be so consistently achieved except from a mind of profound depth and genius.

Consider "The Veteran in a New Field," (1865). A startlingly simple composition, Homer shows a Union veteran, his uniform and cap thrown aside, taking up the scythe to mow a luxuriant field of grain. This painting was completed in 1865; the Civil War had just ended, and President Lincoln had been assassinated.

The Civil War was the bloodiest war the U.S. ever fought, and it was morally unambiguous. The *fact* of that sad, just war—and the equally unambiguous necessity of returning to work to rebuild the nation—is portrayed in a single image: pure, poetic, and powerful. Here the soldier, farmer, *citizen*, "with malice toward none," has set to work. His single-bladed scythe (Homer painted out his initial, cradled scythe) dramatizes the

irony, as it recalls the Reaper of war, even in the pacific return of the harvest.

Homer's most famous War picture is "Prisoners from the Front" (1866) [SEE inside front cover, this issue], a painting which challenges the viewer to understand the War's purpose. Three Southern prisoners—an arrogant plantation youth, a bewildered old man, and a stupefied peasant—are brought face-to-face with the Union General, dignified, humane, and commanding. Transforming these plantation "types" into citizens, along with their freed Black brethren, was a task which every American had reason to believe could be fulfilled.

Homer's post-War images are equally arresting. He creates a quintessentially "American" art, with American subjects, but never banalizes or reduces them to sentimentality. Thus, Homer portrays schoolteachers and schoolchildren; shipbuilders; beach and mountain retreats; games of croquet; and, especially, farm children and country subjects. Notable in many of these images, is the absence of men. America had to begin to grow again, without the 600,000 men who had died in the War, and there is sadness and emerging strength in many of these women and children. In one beautiful image, "The Morning Bell"

(1871), farm girls stand to the right of a brightly-lit diagonal walkway, while a solitary young woman traverses the bridge to begin the morning's millwork, just as millions of Americans would make the transition from agrarian life in the era of burgeoning industrialization.

### The Unresolved Conflict

In 1877, Homer made his one recorded trip to the South, to Virginia, just after U.S. troops had been pulled out, and power had been left in the hands of the Southern oligarchy. Here, in some of his most polemical pictures, Homer portrays the shattered hopes of the former slaves, denied any real economic or cultural advantage. "The Cotton Pickers" (1876) [SEE inside front cover, this issue], sums up this devastating loss to humanity: two girls do what their enslaved mothers and fathers had done before them, handpick cotton—in a field that seems to extend forever.

Most amazing is "The Carnival" (1877), a complex painting which at once conveys the richness and resilience of the life of Blacks after the War, the humility of their station, and the hope that surely "this too shall pass," that America would fulfill its promise. Homer does this in part compositionally, by leading the eye from the solitary small child on the left,

through the active hands of the two adults on either side of the central figure being dressed for the carnival, to the group of children on the right, two of whom are holding American flags, while a butterfly flits beside the man's head.

Homer returned to this theme throughout his long career. In his first trip to the Caribbean in 1885, he frequently portrayed Blacks pausing outside garden walls, cut off from the lush beauty within; or there are sympathetic and powerful portraits of Black men diving for coral. Again in 1898, when he returned to the Bahamas, he concentrated on Black working men, who are portrayed with the same strength and resoluteness as Homer's paintings of fishermen and sportsmen, his other two principal male subjects.

### Transcendent Beauty

In the 1880's, Homer set out in new directions, adding a monumental quality to his oils, and a transcendent beauty and dazzling technique to his watercolors. Beginning with the watercolors he made in a fishing village in England, Homer began a more heroic modeling of his figures. When he returned from England, he moved to Prout's Neck, Maine, where he undertook a new sort of picture of the

sea, of the courageous human activity on and around it, and the elemental force of it—paintings for which he is justly famous. We can see here how absurd the spurious charge that Homer was anti-technology is, since he would have welcomed any innovation that safeguarded the lives of his seafaring friends. One of his last oils, "Searchlight on Harbor Entrance, Santiago de Cuba" (1901), unites as one metaphor the artist's struggle to portray truthfully the profound challenge and danger posed to man by nature, with a celebration of the electrification of the world.

Another of his last great paintings, "The Gulf Stream" (1899) [SEE inside front cover, this issue], combines many of the themes he reworked all his life into an image of shocking power. A solitary Black man has been stranded on a mastless boat, and sharks surround him. The composition occurs in three planes: In the foreground, the ferocious sharks. In the large middle ground, the boat and universal man, frightened yet defiant. At the third level, a faraway ship is lit by a bright sky. Can the ship reach him in time? Can he rouse himself to action to avert disaster, as he awaits its arrival?

This was mankind's dangerous predicament during the period in which Homer forged his optimistic outlook for the American nation and the world. This outlook informs his vision of the decline of that beautiful potential—the promise of equality and progress for all citizens—which was lost after the Civil War. And it holds true for today, when more than ever we need profound art to give us the courage to rouse ourselves to necessary action.

—Janice Chaitkin

*The exhibition was shown at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Oct. 15-Jan. 28. It will be at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Feb. 21-May 26; and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, June 20-Sept. 22.*



"The Carnival," 1877.

Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1922