

Winslow Homer

Winslow Homer is widely recognized today as one of 19th-century America's greatest artists. Born in Boston in 1836, he was essentially a self-taught artist, and his acute sense of observation and his careful and deliberate study of nature inform his realistic yet fluid style. In Boston in the 1850s there were no formal art schools and just a small community of artists. His family encouraged his artistic career, however, his mother was a moderately accomplished watercolorist and his father arranged for his apprenticeship with commercial lithographer John Bufford. Homer did not enjoy his two years (1855-1857) in the lithographer's studio, the hours were long, the wages low, and there was no room for creative independence. In 1857 Homer moved to New York to pursue an illustration career for a variety of magazines, most importantly *Harper's Weekly*. At this time, Homer declared his ambitions to become a painter and demonstrated a mature and individual drawing style. While in New York, Homer took advantage of the increased opportunities to study art by taking classes at the National Academy of Design and with painter Frederick Rondel. Homer's plan for following a traditional study of art, including a trip to Europe, was interrupted by the Civil War. As a "special artist" for Harper's Weekly, Homer chose the soldiers' lives at camp as subject matter rather than battle scenes and his illustrations became quite popular and informative for the public. Homer made drawings and paintings of life during the Civil War that inspired engravings made by him and other printmakers for mass reproduction in the magazine.

After the war, Homer traveled to France in 1866 to exhibit two of his Civil War paintings. While his subsequent work displays an interest in the painting of modern life, there is little evidence that Homer undertook any serious study or was influenced by the radical new ideas in art espoused by Courbet, Manet, and the Impressionists. When Homer returned to the United States in 1867, he painted scenes of modern, everyday life including the leisure activities of middle class women and rural school children. His works have a strong sense of narrative as well as a uniquely American quality of subject matter and style. Homer began painting watercolors seriously in 1873 and as his career developed it was this medium that brought him financial success. Homer became a master watercolor painter and his fresh and vibrant scenes of the Tropics and of hunting guides and fishermen in the Adirondacks did much to elevate the watercolor medium to the status of fine art.

In 1875, Homer ended his career as a commercial illustrator to devote his time and energy to oil and watercolor painting. The creative constraints of publishing illustrations, despite his considerable skill and the freedom offered by freelance work, did not fit into his artistic ambitions. At this time his reputation for being intensely private, unsociable, and even reclusive began to emerge and was further fueled by his moves to an island in Gloucester Harbor, Massachusetts, to Cullercoats on the coast of England, and to his permanent home in Prouts Neck, Maine. A search for new subject matter and inspiration sparked these moves and these remote coastal locations seemed to fit both his personal and artistic needs. Homer lived among the fishermen and women who toiled on the sea in these areas and grew to admire them tremendously. His art of this time developed a new sense of both natural drama and human heroics. Homer settled in Maine in 1883, but made several trips to the Tropics (Cuba, Florida, the Bahamas, and Bermuda) between 1884 and 1903. Here the light and color of the natural landscape inspired a new direction in his watercolor painting and his oil paintings developed an increased sense of dramatic and complex narrative about the struggles of man and nature and life and death.

By 1890, the ocean, an ongoing presence in his work, became Homer's primary subject matter. His time on Prouts Neck gave him the opportunity to study the ocean everyday, in every kind of light and weather and he began to focus on the dramatic and expressive potentials of pure seascape. Paintings like *Weatherbeaten* have come to represent Homer's most personal, moral, and aesthetic statements. *Weatherbeaten* can be easily appreciated for how it captures the look and feel of the ocean through its dynamic composition and virtuoso brushwork. These seascapes are, however, more difficult to interpret in terms of Homer's personal intent. The force of the sea upon the land is explored in this meditation on the physical forces of nature. Homer also suspends a constantly shifting moment in time as the waves crash against the rocks suggesting duration and eternity and inviting reflections on mortality and man's confrontations with nature. *Weatherbeaten* demonstrates the brute confrontation of water and rock, light and dark, liquid and solid, transient and immutable, man and nature, life and death that characterize Homer's late work.