ARTIST SPOTLIGHT

Winslow Homer

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Winslow Homer (1836 – 1910) was a remarkable American painter who mastered several mediums, including oils and watercolors. He lived a fascinating life; working as a commercial illustrator, an artist-correspondent for the Civil War, being published on commemorative stamps and achieving financial success as a fine artist. He did all this as a largely self-taught artist.

In this ebook, I take a closer look at his life and art.

*Winslow Homer, Snap the Whip, 1872*
Here are some interesting facts about Winslow Homer:

- He was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1836. From a young age, he was encouraged to paint by his mother, who was a talented watercolor artist.

- He started his career as an apprentice to a commercial lithographer. He then embarked on a career as a commercial illustrator, which lasted for around 20 years. His work in illustration explains the distinct style of his paintings.

- He was mostly self-taught, learning the fundamentals from his time as an apprentice lithographer and commercial illustrator. But he did take a few art classes here and there.

- American painter and teacher, Robert Henri, referred to Homer as an “integrity of nature”.

- In 1962, Homer’s Breezing Up was featured on a commemorative stamp issued by the U.S. Post Office. That painting is now hanging in the National Gallery in Washington DC.
Homer was sent by Harper’s Magazine to the Civil War (1861 - 1865) as an artist-correspondent. There, he depicted scenes of war, including chaotic battles and quiet moments at camp.
• Upon his return from war, he used his sketches as inspiration for a series of paintings depicting the war, such as *Home Sweet Home* and *Sharpshooter*.

*Winslow Homer, Home Sweet Home, 1863*

*Winslow Homer, Sharpshooter, 1863*
• Around 1873, Homer began painting in watercolors more frequently. He experimented with a wide range of techniques and styles, from detailed and intricate paintings like Blackboard (shown below), to relaxed paintings like The Blazing Sunset (featured later in this ebook). Today, many know of Homer for his watercolor work alone.

![Winslow Homer, Blackboard, 1877](image)

• In 1875, Homer ceased his work as a commercial illustrator to make a living from his paintings. In 1876, at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, his Snap-the-Whip and Breezing Up paintings were exhibited. Homer was widely applauded for his work, but he did receive criticism from author Henry James who wrote of these works:
“We frankly confess that we detest his subjects ... he has chosen the least pictorial range of scenery and civilization; he has resolutely treated them as if they were pictorial ... and, to reward his audacity, he has incontestably succeeded.”

- In 1883, Homer moved to his family’s estate in Prouts Neck, Maine. From there, he created many of his now-famous marine paintings, like *Eight Bells* (shown below) and *Undertow* (featured later in this ebook).

![Winslow Homer, Eight Bells, 1886](image)

- In 1893, Homer painted *The Fox Hunt*, which was immediately purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. It was Homer’s largest painting, coming in around 38 × 68½ inches (96.5 × 174 cm).

![Winslow Homer, The Fox Hunt, 1893](image)
• Homer reached financial stability around 1900, with steady sales of his paintings to collectors.

• In 1910, Homer died at the age of 74 in his Prouts Neck studio. His *Shooting the Rapids, Saguenay River* remains unfinished, but it provides us with some insight into how he worked through a painting.

![Winslow Homer, Shooting the Rapids, Saguenay River, 1905–10](image)

• In 2010, The Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp featuring Homer’s *Boys in a Pasture*. That painting now hangs at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and depicts two children who posed for Homer for 75 cents per day.

• Today, you can take tours of his Prouts Neck studio which is now owned by the Portland Museum of Art.

![Winslow Homer, Boys in a Pasture, 1874](image)
In the beautiful seascape painting below, notice the subtle color variation in the sky; there are all kinds of dull greens, yellows, reds and grays. In fact, there is hardly any blue. Keep this in mind next time you are painting a moody seascape. Don’t fall into the “sky is always blue” trap.

At the bottom of the painting, Homer gave the indication of wet sand reflecting light from the sky and water. Smooth brushwork was used for this area, in contrast against the rough and textured brushwork used for the crashing waves.

*Winslow Homer, On the Beach, 1869*

In the next page is a very delicate painting by Homer, featuring a young lady in a white dress amongst the landscape. As with many of Homer’s paintings, there is a moody feel to the landscape, with dark clouds overhead.

There are pleasing similarities between the lady and the delicate flowers next to her; both are painted with intricate detail and mostly light colors. The rest of the surrounding landscape is painted with relatively basic detail and dull colors.
This is also an excellent example of how to paint white subjects. If you look closely, you will see that hardly any pure white was used; the dress is made up of weak yellows, purples and grays. Homer reserved pure white for only the strongest highlights.

![Winslow Homer, Peach Color, 1878](image)

Below is a stunning example of value contrast (contrast between light and dark). The light in the background really jumps out of the painting. As Homer once said:

> “It is wonderful how much depends upon the relations of black and white. A black and white, if properly balanced, suggests color.”

Also, notice the sweeping brushwork used in the foreground to suggest a strong wind. This is reinforced by the subject whose dress is catching the wind and who appears to be grabbing her hat to stop it from blowing away.

![Winslow Homer, West Wind, 1891](image)
In Homer’s *Girl Fisherman*, the girl emerges from an abstract background. There is a seagull at the top of the painting and just a hint of clouds in the sky. The rest of the background is up to your imagination. The girl, by contrast, is painted with intricate detail and soft, muted colors.

Homer’s colorful watercolor painting below features a pleasing contrast between oranges and blues (complementary colors). I am not sure how Homer painted this, but I assume he started with general washes then scumbled color over the top. Homer also used black to draw your attention to the boat in the middle.
The painting below is much more relaxed, which is appropriate for depicting the fading light of the sunset (less light means less clarity). The painting is limited in terms of hue, with red and black dominating.

![The Blazing Sunset by Winslow Homer, 1880](image1)

*Winslow Homer, The Blazing Sunset, 1880*

The painting below hints at Homer’s work in illustration, with the careful and almost exaggerated rendering of the subjects. What I love about the painting is the control shown in the water; you get a sense of the water’s form and movement without it feeling overdone.

![Undertow by Winslow Homer, 1886](image2)

*Winslow Homer, Undertow, 1886*
Below is a demonstration of Homer’s remarkable control and overall talent. The colors are muted, but not bland. The composition is clever, with there being a pleasing balance between detailed and simplified areas. The brushwork is intricate, yet not overdone. Finally, the deep black used for the teacher’s dress and blackboard draws your attention through the painting towards the center.

Winslow Homer, The Country School, 1871
On talent...

“There is no such thing as talent. What they call talent is nothing but the capacity for doing continuous work in the right way.”

On watercolor painting...

“You will see, in the future I will live by my watercolors.”

On painting from photos...

“Artists should never look at pictures, but should stutter in a language of their own.”

“I prefer every time a picture composed and painted outdoors. The thing is done without your knowing it.”

On light...

“The Sun will not rise or set without my notice and thanks.”

“You have the sky overhead giving one light; then the reflected light from whatever reflects; then the direct light of the sun; so that, in the blending and suffusing of these several luminations, there is no such thing as a line to be seen anywhere.”

On composition...

“Never put more than two waves in a picture; it’s fussy.”

“When you paint, try to put down exactly what you see. Whatever else you have to offer will come out anyway.”
On value...

“It is wonderful how much depends upon the relations of black and white. A black and white, if properly balanced, suggests color.”

Misc...

“I regret very much that I have painted a picture that requires any description.”

“Look at nature, work independently, and solve your own problems.”

“The life that I have chosen gives me my full hours of enjoyment.”

“All is lovely outside my house and inside my house and myself.”

“The most interesting part of my life is of no concern to the public.”

“Oh what a friend chance can be — when it chooses.”

Winslow Homer, The Old Mill. Morning Bell, 1871