



## Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

2 | 2006  
Révolution

---

### How He Sees. Winslow Homer : Poet of the Sea

Museum of American Art, Giverny, 18 June – 24 September 2006

William Gleeson

---



#### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/1166>

DOI : 10.4000/transatlantica.1166

ISSN : 1765-2766

#### Éditeur

AFEA

#### Référence électronique

William Gleeson, « How He Sees. Winslow Homer : Poet of the Sea », *Transatlantica* [En ligne], 2 | 2006, mis en ligne le 24 janvier 2007, consulté le 29 avril 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/1166> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.1166>

---

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 29 avril 2021.



Transatlantica – Revue d'études américaines est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

---

# How He Sees. *Winslow Homer : Poet of the Sea*

Museum of American Art, Giverny, 18 June – 24 September 2006

William Gleeson

---

- 1 For an apparent first-time solo show devoted to Winslow Homer (1836-1910) in France, the curators of Winslow Homer: Poet of the Sea have run counter to the prevailing fashion in museums worldwide of presenting eye-numbing and overwhelming retrospectives and should thus be congratulated on having selected an intelligently-sized group of works. The 54 pictures presented at the Museum of American Art in Giverny run the gamut of, what can be at times, Homer's virtuosic use of artistic media (19 oil paintings, 25 watercolors, 9 charcoal drawings, and 1 etching), and connect the near beginnings of Homer's career (here, the late 1860s) with the very end of it some forty years later. At the center of them all is water, a theme that progressively took on significance in Homer's career. It is on this very point that the English title of the show is somewhat misleading. The French title, *Winslow Homer: Poète des flots*, has captured the poetry and the inclusiveness of Homer's work as well as the sense of movement and flux so intimately linked with water. Indubitably, Homer painted the sea as have very few before and since. An important exhibition of American painters of water would include Thomas Cole, George Caleb Bingham, Fitz Hugh Lane, John Frederick Kensett, Frederic Church, Martin Johnson Heade, and John Marin. But Homer painted water, in all its variations, with a talent for observation that hardly knows any equal along with a largely self-taught technique. *Winslow Homer: Watersmith* might have better expressed two roles, namely that of water as a vector of leisure, essence of life, and an arbiter of destiny and that of Homer as a craftsman.
- 2 The show's introductory boards proclaimed that the spectator would be looking at the works of an artist "widely considered to be the greatest American painter of the 19th century." This exact same attribute already posed problems for the historian Sarah Burns in 1997 during the large Homer retrospective in Boston.<sup>1</sup> Questions of greatness inevitably lead to flights of fancy in the gallery and gaudy trinkets for sale in the museum shop (both thankfully missing at Giverny), that is, an incessant search for

adjectives and nouns to justify the chosen one as the object of our “gaze”. “The greatest of ...”, “one of the most important ...”, “the finest example of ...”, “our best ...” are all shortcuts, types of knowing cultural nods, that allow us to have a sturdy structure of commonality constructed. From that point forward, there is no need to look any further: we already presume to see. By what criteria, though, do we define importance and greatness? If it is the ability to sell tickets and tie-in products, Winslow Homer would have to qualify as important. But using the same criteria, so too would Norman Rockwell, a painter who, despite popular acclaim, has always found it difficult to attract critical approval. Something must substantiate the ability of Homer to have found success among both the people at large and the cognoscenti equally during his lifetime and today.<sup>2</sup> Periodic scrutiny and re-evaluations by no means tarnish the truly “great.” For those familiar with Homer as an American icon, *Winslow Homer: Poet of the Sea* provided an excellent opportunity to rethink certain preconceptions of his work as well as our own presumptions of looking and seeing. For the French public, the show was a long-overdue, though partial, introduction to the work of a key figure in the world of image in Gilded Age America.

- 3 This last point begs the question just why this should be the first show specifically dedicated to Homer in France. After all, Homer had always been well-received in France during his lifetime, having shown two paintings at the 1867 Exposition universelle in Paris<sup>3</sup> and four paintings at the 1900 Exposition universelle<sup>4</sup>, winning not only a Gold Medal at the latter, but also having one of his paintings, *Summer Night* (1890), bought by the French state, and which now hangs at the Orsay Museum. The 1938 show “Trois siècles d’art aux Etats-Unis” organized by the Museum of Modern Art for the Jeu de Paume quite naturally included works by Homer, and the critical consensus at the time was that only he and Thomas Eakins had retained any semblance of independence vis-à-vis Europe<sup>5</sup>, and thus could be considered the only truly American artists. It is important to remember that, even though Homer is a well-established figure in American museums today, the monographic study of nineteenth-century American artists by American scholars is a relatively new phenomenon, dating from the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> It could well have been thought that on this side of the Atlantic, such matters were issues to be fought out among the American academic priesthood. Homer’s absence from the European circuit of one-man shows might also be explained by several factors, imputable to strictly French debates. One could hypothesize that the various post-World War II artistic phenomena such as Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Photo-realism and Conceptual Art usurped the headlines in France, relegating nineteenth-century American realism to the realm of a few specialists. Perhaps, too, the dominant position of Impressionism as a fundamental period in the history of art provided a golden opportunity for the French to proclaim a well-deserved chauvinism, again depriving a stage for Homer (and others) to demonstrate what was being painted during approximately the same time-frame. The winds of museum thinking are shifting in France, if the recent Thomas Eakins show at the Musée d’Orsay and the *American Artists and the Louvre* show at the Louvre are any indication. Let us hope that this Homer show augurs well for further French interest in the American nineteenth century.
- 4 The exhibition at Giverny has been judiciously divided into four sections, chronological for the most part, but more importantly thematic, in order to examine aspects of the use of water in Homer’s work. “The Early Seascapes: The East Coast” presents a Homer enjoying the popularity that his Civil War pictures had brought to him. The engravings

in Harper's Weekly and large oils such as *Prisoners from the Front* had presented a humanist face to the war, far from the grim post-battle realism that the photographer had imposed. If there is any cause for disappointment in the show, it is the lack of representation from this important period in Homer's career, even though admittedly it is not in the purview of the exhibition. The sea scenes in the Giverny show, dating from the decade after the war, retain a kind of muted optimism, perhaps in part due to the paring down of the number of persons depicted in the scenes, compared to the war engravings. In the post-war period, Homer's characters, when present, turn their backs to us or do not solicit our gaze in the slightest, looking instead intently at the ocean; the sea is a source of meditation, but on the future, and given the relative calm of the seas painted, one could be forgiven if one thought that the future was rosy. It could only be so, given the turmoil of the war just past and the economic and social upheaval of the moment in the United States.

- 5 Most of the works presented at the Museum of American Art have Homer painting the appropriation of water by man. Perhaps a reflection of an encounter with the plein-air beach paintings by Boudin, Jongkind and Monet during Homer's travels to France in 1866-67, the early works, such as the 1869 paintings *Beach Scene* and *On the Beach* (fortuitously brought together for the show), recount the rise of leisure activities in immediate post-Civil War America, an era where children—at least of certain socio-economic classes—were seen as a replacement generation and thus allowed relative freedom to be children. But even paintings so seemingly filled with play are reminders of American expectations of its children: the boys line up into the water in a diagonal that will echo that of *Snap the Whip* four years later; testing the waters, braving the miniature breakers, the boys lead the eye towards the horizon where, in the original disposition of the painting, there is a ship, connecting them, and thus the spectator, with the utilitarian and commercial forces of the sea. Boyhood is a step toward manhood, where even play becomes invested with serious social overtones. The girls, on the other hand, approach the water with trepidation, remaining on the beach, prefiguring the landlocked life that Gilded Age America has ordained for them.<sup>7</sup>
- 6 "The Perils of the Sea: Cullercoats, England" documents the more than eighteen months that Homer spent on the North Sea coast of England among a fishing community in 1881-82. In her chapter on Cullercoats in the well-illustrated catalogue that accompanies the show, Bronwyn A. E. Griffin comments on the pictorial link between Homer's drawings, paintings, and watercolors and the works of Jules Breton and the Pre-Raphaelites and, one would add, John Singer Sargent in his paintings from Brittany.<sup>8</sup> There is certainly something folkloric about Homer's images, something akin to illustrations for Tennyson's 1864 epic poem of the ravages of the sea, "Enoch Arden." However, the curators seem to suggest, rightly to a certain degree, that the time spent in England was an artistic turning point in Homer's career, a period that allowed the artist to investigate more fully the confrontation of man and the elements. This turning point is subtly brought home by having the visitor literally turn away from the previous section. The sea in England is no longer a form of reverie, but takes on a brutal force that valiant women, singly or in twos or threes, must confront in order to make a living. The charcoal drawings in this section appear best to convey the combination of desolation and dignity that Homer would seem to have found. What really attracted Homer, though? Is it the stoic bravery of these women faced with a harsh climate and an even harsher life? If so, Homer probably could have stayed in the northeast of the United States to find similar working class women, Homer's denial to the contrary. His

denial in fact gives us a clue to what attracted him: “Look at the fishergirls in this picture I am painting; there are none like them in my country in dress, feature or form.”<sup>9</sup> These women are first and foremost aesthetic creatures, aesthetically desirable for their ethnological value as the Other, and only incidentally for their economic condition.

- 7 The desolation of England fades away in the third section, “Memoranda of Travel: The Adirondacks, Canada and the Tropics.” Homer was a master of watercolor to such a degree that his oils can at times suffer in comparison from a clumsy characterization of people—a trait he shares with that other obsessive perceiver of nature, Claude Monet—and can seem oddly ill-conceived and overwrought. But the watercolors are most emphatically on another plane altogether. In his watercolors, for example, Homer understood the paradox of water being at the same time subject and material to render the subject. Self-taught that he may have been, Homer shows in this group of paintings that he had taken for his own the lessons learned from Michel Eugène Chevreul’s *Chevreul on Color: The Laws of Contrast of Colour and their Application to the Arts*, a book that Homer called “my Bible”:<sup>10</sup> infinitesimal variations on blue from the Caribbean (with wonderfully indifferent skies) and saturated greens, blues, golds, and blacks from the Northeast. Fish leap from rivers and grow into giants, filling almost the entire plane. Brook trout that occupy foreground, mid-ground, and background are conjured from the inky blue-black waters with which they are being painted. These may be paintings in the fishing magazine or trophy fish vein: these fish seem more, though. They convey a regal quality and yet are laden with desperation, as if this were a life that was reduced to or summarized by this very moment of the hunt. With these watercolors, Homer may have in fact painted the first fish portraits, creating a northeastern American pendant to late eighteenth-century English equestrian portraiture. If the portraits as painted by George Stubbs of aristocratic stallions, mares, and foals belong in part to a tradition of bourgeois materialist ownership, the trout as painted by Homer belong in part as well to a similar aesthetic.
- 8 An obvious paradox of landscape painting in general involves the “interiorization” of the outside world: the world is brought inside, thus breaking down the walls of the structures responsible for the creation of the dichotomy of within and without. Constructs that they are, landscapes are and have formally structured worldviews; whether they are walled-in gardens surrounding mansions and villas, Haussmanian Parisian geography, drawings of a countryside, or photographed seascapes, landscape is about power and ideology, the controlling of the eye, the usurpation of nature by man. Nineteenth-century American landscape painting is no different: the lands depicted often represent man’s intimate interaction with nature, using nature to impose a political ideal. This is readily seen in works such as George Inness’s c. 1856 *The Lackawanna Valley* and Thomas Cole’s 1836 *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm – The Oxbow*, but how about Homer? Many of the Adirondack pictures transcribe working vacations in a club setting, Homer blocking out in the theatrical sense his comrades in urban escape. By the end of the nineteenth century, a majority of Americans dwelt in the city, distancing themselves from the experience of wilderness that had not only marked but had virtually defined American society. A small number of wealthy businessmen, however, had access to a return to the primeval world of hunting and fishing, using their financial resources to establish private game reserves. It was as a member of one of these, the North Woods Club, that Homer made many of his watercolors, depicting what Sarah Burns has seen as “the

rugged individual's 'natural' dominion over the natural world."<sup>11</sup> We are far from the leisure of the beach and the arbitrariness of the ocean: man, in the form of the capitalist baron, measures himself up against the adventure of nature and is always the winner. Homer has succeeded in crafting a political painting from the simple, vicarious image of a trout fisherman: the wealthy industrialists pictured, and who were essentially Homer's clientele, controlled the water and the wilderness by literally owning it. Buying a Homer watercolor meant buying the very water you already owned.

- 9 An irony of sort is that in order for these fish to exist in the paintings, in order for us to even see them, they must leave their natural environment; they must abandon the water that is their very connection to life. These fish are risking death, suspended in air, in order to be caught by our regard. It can only be conjecture to speculate if Homer wanted these fish to stand in for man and the notion that man can only really live if he risks leaving his environment and faces his own mortality. Further speculation might lead us to think of these fish as proxies for the very acts of painting, exhibiting, and viewing, in that the artist uncovers what we cannot or will not usually see, magnifies it, and places it before the spectator, defying him to confront the essence of his own mortal humanity.<sup>12</sup>
- 10 If there is a high point in the show, it must be the unforgettable 1895 black and white watercolor, *Trout Fishing, Lake St. John, Quebec*. In his oft-cited words, Homer believed that black and white could, in a sense, insinuate all colors,<sup>13</sup> a lesson that the fifteenth-century Japanese painter Sesshû would have been loath to disagree with. Far from the imposed monochromatic engravings published in *Harper's Weekly*, the black and white in this watercolor expresses an exquisite quietude due in no small part to the potential of color in Homer's rich palette of blacks, whites, and grays. Nature is still; man is the double initiator of movement and change in this painting. A lone oarsman uses his own force to propel the boat and a fisherman is caught in mid-cast, his line white against the tree-lined banks. Holding the canoe to the edge of the painting is its wake, a kind of visible memory, a bold white stroke that ties the boat and its occupants to that dark region where they came from. This inability to break away from the past, from the origin of one's journey, is accentuated by the remarkable arc of the fishing line, an echo of the other fishing watercolors in the show.<sup>14</sup> The line reaches the precise middle of the paper only to have its curve return on itself. Homer has captured the cast at the exact point of equilibrium: a split second later, the line will be soaring before the boat; a split second earlier, the cast would be inchoate. Just as black and white is potential color, so the depicted cast is potential action. To advance, to cast your line as far as you can, it is necessary to return the line behind you. In this simple image ostensibly about trout fishing, Homer has succeeded in combining the three dimensions of time – past, present, and future – into a single space, and in doing so has erased time: timeless not from a universality of human action but timeless from our incapacity to frame time. What is movement but the mastery of action through space and time? Unlike the stop-action photographs of an Eadweard Muybridge whose process from the 1870s showed action as a succession of movement, Homer's image is the quintessence of the singularity of movement.
- 11 The final section is dedicated to the late seascapes painted at Homer's studio in Prout's Neck, Maine, oil paintings for the most part and the majority having as their subject the Lear-like wrath of the sea. It cannot be denied that the sea, the Atlantic Ocean to be more specific, had long played an important role in American culture, acting as the

defining space between the parentheses of the United States on one side and England, Continental Europe, and Africa on the other: at the same time, separation and connection. But certainly by the 1890s, and arguably much earlier, those parentheses had shifted: oceans now surrounded the centrality of land, the idea of American land having become elemental. The balance of oceanic urgency had shifted irrepressibly towards the west. It is perhaps the reason why the late paintings in the show at Giverny in particular have a sense of loss: not only are they depictions of the tempest-tossed tribulations of humanity, but culturally they present literally the outer margins of American life at the turn of the twentieth century. The stormy coasts of the Atlantic which had helped populate America and spawn American culture and American identity are more and more devoid of people in Homer's canvases. This portrayal of the diminishing import of the painted figure mixed with scenes of high-sea danger compels us to visualize an expression of what we might think of as the chagrined resignation of the end of Northeastern dominance on the American scene. Homer seems torn between the protective qualities of nostalgia and the inevitable folly of trusting in the slippery protection of water. It is in this section that we find the images that are among those that the average museum-goer would instantly recognize as Winslow Homer's: the melodramatic *Life Line* of 1884; a paean to empire building *Searchlight on Harbor Entrance, Santiago de Cuba* (1901); and the indefatigable *Fox Hunt* (1893).

- 12 This last picture, as famous an image in Homer's oeuvre as you will find, is believed to highlight the empathy that Homer is to have felt with the hunted fox, the primary piece of evidence cited being the slope of the signature echoing the movement of the fox.<sup>15</sup> The painting certainly fits into Homer's work on hunting and his commentary on life and death, including the splendid and ambiguous *Right and Left*.<sup>16</sup> Yet, this picture is more than that. The curators were right to place this work, with its relatively small parcel of ocean, in a show on the sea, if for no other reason than to remind us that Homer was a sensuous painter, interested in the world of the senses. At first glance, the vast expanse of snow would lead us to believe that the scene is to be played out in the frosty silence of winter. But looking closely at the elements of the painting, what do we see, or rather hear? Cawing ravens, an ocean in uproar, the panting and the yipping of the fox, the possible braying of dogs: this is a sonorous painting and it forces us to reconsider what we have seen before this in the show. Homer has painted sound as much as sight; the virtuosity comes not so much from the rendering of waves and currents as from the aural quality of the scene. As for the signature, if we are to accept the empathetic reading, we should really follow it all the way through. Homer's signature may mirror the movement of the beast, but it moves in counter-motion to the animal's gait. Homer is in fact driving the fox back towards us, the hunter-spectator. *Fox Hunt*, then, becomes a painting of suspension. Bat-like ravens await impatiently; the viewer, too. But what should we make of the presence of the minuscule white bird far to the painting's left? Is this salvation? A false hope? A sort of winged polestar designed to guide this wretched, chased creature out of the constricted space of the frame? Or might it just be a common gull, a scavenger like the more overt ravens, waiting for the outcome to prey on whatever might remain?
- 13 Even after viewing the works in the show several times, it remains difficult to classify them. Do these pictures owe a direct debt to the American landscape schools of the nineteenth century? Are they not narratives in the genre tradition? Early on in his artistic career, Homer presented his viewers—one is almost tempted to say "readers"—with illustrative explanations, brimming with people and activity. Homer may have



continued this trend until the end of his life, just making the underlying texts slightly more difficult to read. And just as reading, through the invention of the printing press, can be thought of as the “triumph over the oral tradition of knowing”<sup>17</sup> so too might we consider the late seascapes and the Adirondack watercolors as the triumph of painting over the visual tradition of seeing. There is more than a hint of Thoreau in these works. Both Thoreau and Homer have an aura of dwellers outside the quotidian, bringers of truths back to the materialist world. In the case of Homer, that was often a well-calculated pose. Many of the Adirondack watercolors were painted within a few hundred feet of a club house. Those powerful paintings from Prout’s Neck, so evocative of the fight for survival, were not painted in a monastic solitude, but surrounded by vacationers, living on land developed by the Homer family.<sup>18</sup> The only real wilderness around Homer in Maine was his own parcel of land. This subtraction of the encroaching effects of the urban on the wild, the denial of leisure, the primacy of nature over the man-made, is suggestive of Frederic Church’s 1857 painting, *Niagara*. In this work, Church erased the presence and the effects of a booming tourist trade around Niagara Falls, searching instead to promote the sacredness of such a sight.<sup>19</sup> If the absence of people implies godliness in Church, that same absence in late Homer would appear to imply the godforsaken. In an earlier painting such as *Life Line*, there is the implication that rescue is both physical and spiritual.<sup>20</sup> Twenty years after, in *A Summer Squall* (1904), unfortunately not in the show at Giverny, rescue looks to be improbable: the small sailboat caught in wintry waves, its sail billowing vainly almost shroud-like, and the two occupants reduced to mere shadows. Help is nowhere to be seen. In the foreground is a prominent rock, the ocean’s fury rushing over it. A rock or a ledge like this is often the site of human activity and observation in Homer’s earlier works, such as *Long Branch, New Jersey* (1869), *A Fresh Breeze* (c. 1881) or *Watching the Breakers* (1891). But in *A Summer Squall*, the rock is an empty pedestal. There is no surrogate figure for the viewer, who is now the helpless witness to a scene fraught with danger. The viewer and the painter can only be onlookers, ultimately reduced to seeing, not acting. “Who can say what *is*?” Thoreau could have been writing about a fellow admirer of the state of Maine. “He can only say *how he sees*.”<sup>21</sup>

---

## NOTES

1. Sarah Burns, “Modernizing Winslow Homer,” *American Quarterly* 49:3 (1997), 615.
2. This similarity across the century warrants examination in order to comprehend the quite certain societal shifts in aesthetic appreciation: are the same people looking at and understanding the same ideas in the same images?
3. *Prisoner from the Front* (1866) and *The Bright Side* (1866).
4. *Fox Hunt* (1893); *Maine Coast* (1895); *The Lookout*, “All’s Well” (1896); and *Summer Night* (1890).
5. *Paris 1900: Les artistes américains à l’exposition universelle* (Paris: Paris Musées, 2001), 173.



6. Wanda M. Corn, "Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art," *Critical Issues in American Art: A Book of Readings*, ed. Mary Ann Calo (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 8-12.
7. Alice Fahs has argued that the ethos of the late nineteenth-century repudiated the maternal values that had played such a prevalent role in the construction of mentalities of the Civil War. See Alice Fahs, "Remembering the Civil War in Children's Literature of the 1880s and 1890s," *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture*, eds. Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 79-93.
8. Bronwyn A. E. Griffith, "The Perils of the Sea: Cullercoats, England," *Winslow Homer: Poet of the Sea*, ed. Sophie Lévy (Giverny: Musée d'art américain, Terra Foundation for American Art, 2006), 76.
9. Quoted in Griffith, 76.
10. Judith C. Walsh, "Mixing Oil and Water: The Development of Winslow Homer's Painting," in Lévy, *Winslow Homer: Poet of the Sea*, 43.
11. Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 210.
12. It would be interesting to investigate whether Homer had knowledge of *katagami*, a form of Japanese stencilling used in fabric design especially during the Edo period. Fish patterns were especially utilized in *katagami*.
13. Winslow Homer cited in James Thomas Flexner, *That Wilder Image: The Painting of America's Native School from Thomas Cole to Winslow Homer* (New York: Dover, 1970), 289.
14. As well as the line of boys in *Snap the Whip*.
15. Sophie Lévy, "Mastering the Elements: Prout's Neck, Maine," *Winslow Homer: Poet of the Sea*, 91-92.
16. See John Wilmerding, "Winslow Homer's *Right and Left*," *American Views: Essays on American Art*, by John Wilmerding (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 223-243.
17. Richard Walker, "Unseen and Disbelieved: A Political Economist among Cultural Geographers," *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, eds. Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 166.
18. Burns, *Inventing*, 190.
19. Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 159-161.
20. Jules D. Prown, "Winslow Homer in His Art," *Reading American Art*, eds. Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 264-279. For the specific question of spiritual salvation, see 274.
21. Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, December 2, 1846 quoted in Alfred I. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 224.

---

## INDEX

**Thèmes** : Trans'Arts

## AUTEUR

**WILLIAM GLEESON**

Université Paris VII - Denis Diderot