WINSLOW HOMER
A SELECTION
OF WATERCOLORS, DRAWINGS
AND PRINTS
FROM THE METROPOLITAN
MUSEUM OF ART
WINSLOW HOMER

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Catalogue by Natalie Spassky, Assistant Curator, American Paintings and Sculpture

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

On the cover: detail of no. 32

1. The Army of the Potomac—A Sharpshooter on Picket Duty (no. 6)
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N.S.
In response to a request for information for a prospective biography, Winslow Homer wrote the art critic William Howe Downes in 1908: "It may seem ungrateful to you that after your twenty-five years of hard work in booming my pictures I should not agree with you in regard to that proposed sketch of my life. But I think that it would probably kill me to have such [a] thing appear, and, as the most interesting part of my life is of no concern to the public, I must decline to give you any particulars in regard to it." This intriguing letter, which marks the beginning of Lloyd Goodrich's definitive biography of Winslow Homer provides some insight into the reserved character of the New England artist who is one of America's finest painters.

Born in 1836 in Boston, Homer attended school in Cambridge. His early interest in art was encouraged by both his parents. His mother was a skillful painter in watercolors, and his father, an importer of hardware, sent Homer sets of lithographs for study purposes from London during a visit. At nineteen Homer became an apprentice at the lithographic firm of J. H. Bufford in Boston. His early work at Bufford's consisted of designing title pages for sheet music, but recognition of his talent led to more challenging assignments. He decided to become an artist at this time, and when he completed his apprenticeship and left Bufford's in 1857 he was determined to support himself as an illustrator. His first illustrations appeared that year in Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion, the noted Boston weekly, and in the newly founded illustrated magazine, Harper's Weekly, in New York. The subjects of these early illustrations were drawn from city life in Boston, events at Harvard, summer and winter amusements such as bathing and skating, and various aspects of New England farm life, such as harvesting.

In the fall of 1859, Homer left Boston to go to New York. He declined an offer for a staff position at Harper's in favor of free-lance work, because, as he told his early biographer George W. Sheldon in 1878: "I had had a taste of freedom. The slavery at Bufford's was too fresh in my recollection to let me care to bind myself again. From the time that I took my nose off that lithographic stone, I have had no master, and never shall have any." With the exception of two years, his illustrations appeared in Harper's Weekly from 1857 through 1875. Three engravings of winter scenes in the city (nos. 1-3), dating from January 1860, represent Homer's early work for the New York magazine.

Before photomechanical methods of reproduction came into common use in the late 1870s, wood engraving, or direct printing from a wooden block, was one method of reproducing illustrations. The process is described in the December 1865 issue of Harper's New Monthly Magazine as follows:

A block of solid wood is cut off across the grain, just the height of type (a little less than an inch). The upper surface of this is polished and upon this the artist, with a fine lead pencil, makes a drawing precisely as though he were making it upon paper, giving every line just as he wishes it to appear. This block is given to the engraver, who cuts away every part of the wood not covered by the artist's lines, which are thus left standing in relief. The only wood with sufficient toughness and closeness of grain for fine engravings is box-wood. Of this it is difficult to procure pieces more than five inches square; for larger pictures the block is composed of several pieces accurately fitted together, and fastened
by bolts and screws. A double-page picture in Harper's Weekly will be composed of forty separate pieces. . . . It must not be supposed, however, that the skill of the wood-engraver is limited to the mere mechanical task of following the exact lines traced by the artist. In many parts of a drawing the artist does not actually draw all the lines. Thus he paints in a sky in India-ink, giving the general form of the clouds, and the gradations of tone and color. The engraver translates this into lines of different forms and sizes, the difference in tone being given by making the lines finer or coarser, or nearer or farther apart. The artistic effect of a fine engraving depends greatly upon the thickness of the lines. . . . Sometimes a single engraver executes an entire block; quite as often, in large establishments, several are engaged, each doing the part for which he has a special taste or aptitude.

The artist's drawing was therefore destroyed in the process of engraving. According to Goodrich, as far as is known Homer never cut a block himself, and with few exceptions he is responsible for the original drawing in pencil and wash directly on the block. Despite the number of different engravers whose names appear on Homer's illustrations, the illustrations have a stylistic consistency that was found much less often when the engraver worked after a drawing or painting rather than with an original drawing on the block. Goodrich notes that the French engraver Damoreau, who cut several of Homer's illustrations, first gave him instructions in the art of drawing on the block while Homer was at Buffard's in Boston.

Homer's formal art training was limited. In addition to his apprenticeship at Buffard's, according to Sheldon, he attended a drawing school in Brooklyn when he first came to New York. About 1861 he went to night school at the National Academy of Design and for a month, according to Sheldon, took lessons in painting from Frédéric Rondel, a French genre and landscape painter. "Once a week, on Saturdays, [Rondel] taught him how to handle his brush, set his palette, etc. The next summer he bought a tin box containing brushes, colors, oils, and various equipments and started into the country to paint from Nature."

When the Civil War broke out, Homer became an artist-correspondent for Harper's Weekly. Assigned to the Army of the Potomac, he visited their camp in October 1861 and spent a month, from April to early May, on the Peninsular Campaign in 1862. Although during the following years he made occasional trips to the front, his illustrations for the New York magazine decreased with his growing preoccupation with painting.

The majority of Homer's war illustrations show the daily routine of camp life, drawn with realistic candor and at times with humorous undertones (no. 7). A Cavalry Charge and A Bayonet Charge (nos. 4 and 5), vivid confrontations presented with penetrating realism, were drawn in New York in 1862 and are two rare examples of battle scenes among Homer's war illustrations. In 1863 Homer returned to lithography in Campaign Sketches, a series of six lithographs published by Louis Prang in Boston. The following year Prang and Company issued Life in Camp, a set of twenty-four lithographic cards by Homer, showing daily aspects of army life in amusing vignettes.

The war experience provided subjects for Homer's earliest oil paintings. A Sharpshooter on Picket Duty (fig. 1, no. 6), published in Harper's in the fall of 1862, is an engraving after a painting described as Homer's "first picture in oils," painted in his studio in the New York University Building on Washington Square. From 1863 Homer exhibited his paintings at the National Academy of Design in New York, and in 1865, at the age of twenty-nine, he was elected an Academician. The following year he finished his most celebrated war painting, Prisoners from the Front (Metropolitan Museum), representing a Union officer with several Confederate prisoners. Downes reports that Homer posed mannequins on the roof of his building to achieve convincing effects of sunlight on his figures. The enthusiastic reception of Prisoners from the Front at the National Academy of Design in 1866 firmly established Homer's reputation. It was one of two paintings by the artist shown in the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1867, and a reviewer writing in the London Art Journal observed: "Certainly most capital for touch, character, and vigour, are a couple of little pictures, taken from the recent war, by Mr. Winslow Homer, of New York. These works are real: the artist paints what he has seen and known."

Late in 1866 Homer went to Europe for the first time and spent ten months in France. Three illustrations published in Harper's, showing can-can dancers and a waltzing couple in Parisian dance halls and art students and copyists in the Louvre, are based on his European experience, but little is known about his activities. Downes reported: "What he did not do while he was in France is somewhat significant. He did not enter the atelier of the most renowned French master; he did not make copies of the famous masterpieces in the Louvre; he did not go to Concarneau or to Grèz or to any of the favorite painting-grounds of the young American artists; and he did not, so far as is known, make many friends among his fellow-artists. That he visited the Louvre and the Luxembourg and the Cluny and the picture galleries of the
international exposition may be taken for granted; but what he thought of all that he saw there he never told anybody."

The effects of this trip on Homer’s artistic development remain open to speculation. Homer undoubtedly visited the Universal Exposition, where Prisoners from the Front was on display. He probably saw the independent exhibition, outside the fair, of the works of Courbet, the leading exponent of realism, and Manet, whose bold approach, original style, and simplified forms made him a controversial figure in Parisian art circles of the 1860s. The first impressionist group exhibition occurred in 1874, and it is questionable whether Homer had the opportunity to see the paintings of the future impressionists in 1867. Similarities to the works of Monet and Degas observed in Homer’s work probably originate in their common approach to painting—based on observation, the direct study of nature, and an interest in the effects of light on form. Homer’s compositions and the strong sense of design especially evident in his illustrations of the late 1860s and 1870s have often been attributed to the influence of Japanese prints. Japanese prints were in vogue among Parisian artists, and Homer may have been familiar with them. More probably, however, he achieved comparable effects of design and composition through his independent printmaking experience. During his first year of apprenticeship at Bufford’s, Homer is reported to have remarked to Joseph F. Cole, a fellow apprentice: "If a man wants to be an artist, he should never look at pictures." Throughout his life Homer’s artistic development was due more to direct observation of nature than to the influence of the works of other artists, and later reports confirm that he retained the attitude expressed in his youth. "Homer was less influenced by others and by what others had done than any artist—any man, I may as well say—I have ever known," his friend J. Eastman Chase observed in 1910 (Harper’s Weekly, October 22).

Homer returned to America in the fall of 1867 and in 1872 took a studio at the Tenth Street Studios, the home of many American artists. Although he lived in the city for some twenty years, the urban scene, with a few exceptions, had no place in his paintings and illustrations. The subjects of Homer’s work after the war were the fashionable diversions of country life and the rural scene. During his childhood Homer “acquired a lasting liking for out-door country-life,” Sheldon reported in 1879. “The ponds, the meadows, and the fishing, became his delight. To this day there is no recreation that he prefers to an excursion into the country.” He explored the world of summer resorts and watering places in The Summit of Mount Washington (no. 9), based on two paintings from summer trips to the White Mountains in 1868 and 1869, and The Beach at Long Branch (no. 10), published in 1869. A more rustic setting is surveyed in such works as “Snap-the-Whip” (no. 20), Homer’s celebrated composition of a children’s country game, based on two paintings of 1872. Homer’s illustrations and paintings of the third quarter of the nineteenth century record rural American life, presented with an acute eye for truth, marked by realism and lacking the sentimentality that characterized the works of many artists working in the genre tradition. His direct approach and broad execution were often misinterpreted as a lack of finish and disconcerted critics accustomed to the accepted mode of academic painting. In a review of Homer’s work at the National Academy of Design in 1875, for example, Henry James condemned Homer’s choice of subject matter, but he provided an especially perceptive account of the artist’s painting style:

The most striking pictures in the exhibition were perhaps those of Mr. Homer... Mr. Homer goes in, as the phrase is, for perfect realism. He is a genuine painter; that is, to see, and to reproduce what he sees, is his only care. He is almost barbarously simple, and, to our eye, he is horribly ugly; but there is nevertheless something one likes about him.

What is it? For ourselves, it is not his subjects. We frankly confess that we detest his subjects—his barren plank fences, his glaring, bald, blue skies, his big, dreary, vacant lots of meadows, his freckled, straight-haired Yankee urchins, his flat-breasted maidens, suggestive of a dish of rural doughnuts and pie, his calico sun-bonnets, his flannel shirts, his cowhide boots. He has chosen the least pictorial features of the least pictorial range of scenery and civilization; he has resolutely treated them as if they were pictorial, as if they were every inch as good as Capri or Tangiers; and, to reward his audacity, he has incontestably succeeded... Mr. Homer has the great merit, moreover, that he naturally sees everything at one with its envelope of light and air. He sees not in lines, but in masses, in gross broad masses. Things come already modelled to his eye.

In 1870 Homer visited the Adirondacks, which later became one of his favorite retreats for camping, fishing, and hunting expeditions with his brother Charles. The Adirondacks and, later, Canada furnished material for many oils, illustrations, and watercolors (no. 45).

4. Raid on a Sand-Swallow Colony—“How Many Eggs?”
Although he worked in watercolors before 1873, it was during that summer, spent at Gloucester, Massachusetts, that Homer first extensively explored the medium. Several of Homer's best illustrations appearing in the 1873 issue of Harper's (nos. 19, 21-23) are based on oils and watercolors from the summer in Gloucester. Characterized by vivid contrasts of dark and light and a strong sense of surface design, these illustrations and those of the following year (fig. 4, nos. 25-27) rank with his finest work in the graphic medium. Homer first exhibited at the American Society of Painters in Water Colors in the spring of 1874, and he became a member of the Society in 1877. Goodrich suggests that Homer's discovery of watercolor painting was one of the artist's major reasons for abandoning illustrating. 1875 was the date of his last work for Harper's.

The artist spent June of 1874 in the Adirondacks. In 1875 he visited Virginia and in the following years painted some brilliant works using Negro subjects. He spent the summer of 1878 at Houghton Farm, Mountainville, New York, and in 1880 returned to Gloucester. During these last two trips he concentrated on watercolors.

Unlike his contemporaries who flocked to Paris during the 1880s, on his second trip to Europe, in 1881, Homer traveled to England and settled near Tynemouth on the North Sea, not far from Newcastle. The two years spent in England were almost entirely devoted to watercolor painting, and the studies produced during this time of the hazardous life of the North Sea fishermen and their families, dependent on the sea under variable weather conditions, furnished thematic material for a series of watercolors, paintings, and etchings (fig. 5, nos. 33-35) executed in the years following Homer's return to America.

"The sea, and the lives of those who go down to the sea in ships, became, from this time, his one great theme, and even the earliest and least pretentious of his marine motives had in them the ring of that inalienable veracity . . . which . . . made of his sea pieces the incomparable masterpieces that they are," Downes observed in 1911. Inside the Bar, Tynemouth (fig. 6, no. 29), dated 1883, demonstrates Homer's dramatic use of this material. Painted in a more opaque technique than his previous work in the medium (see no. 28), Inside the Bar, Tynemouth shows a studied composition, also characteristic of the other watercolors of the series. The pencil sketch A Fisher Girl on the Beach (no. 30) repeats the central motif of The Incoming Tide (American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York), another watercolor derived from material collected in England. The central figure in both works is Homer's idealized conception of the Tynemouth woman, who makes a distinctive contrast to her fashionable American counterpart (no. 28). Noting Homer's "natural and unstudied adherence to literal truth" and his "power or faculty of seeing things in their integrity, and of rendering that aspect of them in pictures," Downes added, "The entire Tynemouth series of watercolors was precisely as true to English facts, conditions, and character as the American pictures had been to American facts, conditions, and character."

In November of 1882 Homer returned to America. He spent the early summer of 1883 in Atlantic City, where he made the acquaintance of members of the lifesaving crews. The Life Line (Philadelphia Museum of Art), a dramatic painting of a rescue scene at sea, was completed in 1884, acclaimed at the spring exhibition of the National Academy of Design, and sold on the opening day of the exhibition. Two months later Homer began the etching The Life Line (no. 31), the first in a series of eight plates etched between 1884 and 1889 (see nos. 32-35) after his paintings and English watercolors. The etchings produced during this period represent a major new phase in the artist's graphic work.

Homer's training in etching was limited to his own studies and the advice of fellow artists and his New York printer George W. H. Ritchie, who was also an etcher. Ritchie supplied the artist with prepared plates covered with an acid-resistant ground. Homer scratched the plate with a sharp instrument and did his own biting, or corroding the metal in the lines with acid. He then returned the plates to Ritchie for proofing, since he had no press, and finally for lettering and printing. The Metropolitan Museum has five of Homer's original plates from which impressions were taken. Homer's style of etching, perhaps under the influence of his training as an illustrator, was chiefly dependent on line. As Goodrich observed, dark areas or tonal variations were achieved by a concentration of line rather than by selective wiping or inking of the plate in the final printing process. With the exception of his last known etching, Fly Fishing, Saranac Lake, Homer used conservative techniques in his etchings and did little experimenting in the medium.

One of his largest and finest etchings is Eight Bells (detail on cover, no. 32), dated 1887 and based on a painting of the same title from the preceding year (Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover). During 1888 Homer produced three plates, Perils of the Sea, A Voice from the Cliffs, and Mending the Tears (nos. 33-35), using compositions of three of his English watercolors in reverse. In May 1888 Homer wrote J. Eastman Chase: "I have an idea for next winter
if what I am now engaged on is a success. . . . That is to exhibit an oil-painting in a robbery-box with an etching from it in the end of your gallery, with a pretty girl at the desk to sell." Homer's hopes for financial profit with his etchings were disappointed, and probably because of this he abandoned etching in 1889. His work in etching represents a major achievement in the medium, and in 1902 he described a series of watercolors from the West Indies as "as good work, with the exception of one or two etchings, as I ever did."

Homer spent part of the summer of 1883 in Prout's Neck, a rocky peninsula on the coast of Maine several miles south of Portland, and soon afterward settled there permanently. Although he spent several winters at Prout's Neck, from 1884 he often went south and in the course of the following years visited Cuba, Nassau, Bermuda, and Florida. These places were the source of two major paintings, The Gulf Stream of 1899, and Searchlight, Harbor Entrance, Santiago de Cuba of 1901 (both Metropolitan Museum), as well as many brilliant watercolors (figs. 7, 8, nos. 36-44, 46, 47). Homer considered a group of these watercolors as his best work in the medium and kept them in his collection at Prout's Neck. In 1909 he wrote Bryson Burroughs, assistant curator of paintings at the Metropolitan: "The watercolors that you refer to are still hanging on my wall—I think of you and the Museum when I happen to look at them & I never forget that I have promised to submit them to you before offering them to any other party—. . . . I am not in any hurry & I am sure to notify you." Goodrich reports that at one time Homer remarked to Charles R. Henschel of Knoedler's: "You will see, in the future I will live by my watercolors." Twelve of these works, painted in the Bahamas, Bermuda, Florida, Key West, and the Adirondacks (nos. 36-47) from 1898 to 1903 were purchased by the Metropolitan after the artist's death from his brother Charles S. Homer.

A self-sufficient and reserved man with an aversion to social life and publicity, Homer realized his desire for the solitary life in his retreat to Maine in the 1880s. His satisfaction with this life is expressed in many letters to his family and friends. In a letter of 1893, recorded by Goodrich, to the Boston lithographer Louis Prang, he wrote: "I deny that I am a recluse as is generally understood by that term. Neither am I an unsociable hog. . . . This is the only life in which I am permitted to mind my own business. I suppose I am today the only man in New England who can do it. I am perfectly happy & contented." Homer died at Prout's Neck in 1910.
Catalogue

The measurements supplied in the catalogue are as follows: the picture image excluding the caption for wood engravings; plate size for etchings; sheet size for drawings and watercolors. Height precedes width for each entry.


These three winter scenes, examples of Homer’s relatively few illustrations of city life, demonstrate the animated, descriptive, and anecdotal character of Homer’s early work as an illustrator.

Homer’s earliest representations of skating scenes appeared in Boston’s Ballou’s Pictorial in 1859. The sport, a popular theme with the artist, was the subject of several illustrations as well as Skating on the Central Park, the first picture Homer exhibited at the National Academy of Design, New York, in 1860, provisionally identified by Homer’s biographer Lloyd Goodrich as an unsigned watercolor in the City Art Museum of St. Louis. A chromolithograph based on the watercolor was published by J. H. Bufford, Boston, in 1861.

Skating on the Ladies’ Skating-Pond in the Central Park resembles the St. Louis watercolor and exemplifies the descriptive quality of Homer’s work. Goodrich noted that the text accompanying this illustration in Harper’s Weekly explains that there were two skating ponds, for ladies and gentlemen, and in the former “no gentlemen are allowed to skate unless they are accompanied by ladies.”


During the Civil War Homer served as an artist-correspondent for Harper’s Weekly on several occasions. His trips to the front in a reportorial capacity provided material for many illustrations and lithographs showing general conditions rather than specific events. Executed after Homer’s return to New York from the Peninsular Campaign, A Cavalry Charge and A Bayonet Charge are two of Homer’s rare representations of combat. The accompanying text in Harper’s informs the reader that the works are “by our artist, Mr. Winslow Homer, who spent some time with the Army of the Potomac, and drew his figures from life” and characterizes A Bayonet Charge as “one of the most spirited pictures ever published in this country.”


A Sharpshooter on Picket Duty, published in the fall of 1862, is based on one of Homer’s earliest paintings and illustrates the artist’s strong sense of composition. In a letter to American Art News, published October 29, 1910, Homer’s friend the painter R. M. Shurtleff reported: “His very first picture in oils was painted in his studio in the old University Building in Washington Square. It represented a ‘Sharpshooter’ seated in a big top, aiming at a distant ‘Reb,’ a canvas about 16 by 20, sat with him many days while he worked on it, and remember discussing with him how much he could ask for it. He decided not less than sixty dollars, as that was what Harper paid him for a full page drawing on the wood.” According to Downes, Homer placed this painting and another showing a soldier being punished for intoxication (a painting later described by Homer as “about as beautiful and interesting as the button on a barn-door”) on exhibition. At the same time Homer received another offer to take a staff position on Harper’s and wrote to his brother that if the two paintings were not sold he would give up painting and accept the proposition. His brother purchased both paintings without telling him.


The majority of Homer’s illustrations during the Civil War focused on the daily round of camp life, which he depicted with candid realism and at times with a keen sense of humor verging on caricature and dependent on exaggerated gestures, poses, and facial contortions for expressive effects. Thanksgiving in Camp typifies these illustrations.


inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 29.88.7(5)
After his return from his first European trip in the
fall of 1867 Homer visited the White Mountains
during the summers of the following two years.
Two paintings, The Bridle Path, Mount Washington
(1868, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute,
Williamstown) and Mount Washington (1869, Art
Institute of Chicago), and a pencil drawing (1869,
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York) are related to
this illustration in Harper's Weekly. Homer's
accomplished use of light for modeling form and
for atmospheric effects to represent the distant
summit in both paintings is skillfully translated into
the graphic medium.

10. The Beach at Long Branch. Appleton's Journal,
August 21, 1869. Wood engraving by John Karst,
12 7/8 x 19 9/16 inches. Harris Brisbane Dick
Fund, 33.21.2(1)
A recurrent theme in Homer's illustrations during
the late 1860s and early 1870s was the activity
at summer resorts and fashionable watering places,
including the White Mountains, Lake George,
Saratoga, Long Branch, and Gloucester. The Beach
at Long Branch is typical of this aspect of Homer's
work. Homer provided the drawing in line and wash
directly on the prepared block, and the engraver,
John Karst in this case, cut the block, leaving lines
and areas in relief for printing. Wood engraving is
essentially a linear medium, and tonal variations
were achieved by the dense concentration of fine
parallel lines, or crosshatching. The engraver's name
appears on the lower left in this illustration, and
Homer's initials appear as prints in the sand.

11. The Fishing Party. Appleton's Journal,
October 2, 1869. Wood engraving by John Filmer,
9 x 12 5/8 inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund,
33.21.2(2)

12. Spring Blossoms. Harper's Weekly, May 21,
1870. Wood engraving, 9 x 13 3/4 inches. Harris
Brisbane Dick Fund, 29.88.8(4)

13. High Tide (fig. 2). Every Saturday, August 6,
1870. Wood engraving, 9 1/4 x 12 inches. Harris
Brisbane Dick Fund, 30.75.1(1)

14. Low Tide (fig. 3). Every Saturday, August 6,
1870. Wood engraving by Kingdon, 9 1/4 x 12
inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 30.75.1(2)
Both High Tide and Low Tide, published in
Boston's short-lived weekly Every Saturday in
August 1870, are illustrations after Homer's
paintings. High Tide (Metropolitan Museum),
painted in 1870 and showing either Manchester-
by-the-Sea on the North Shore or Marshfield on the
South Shore, was probably the work exhibited at
the National Academy of Design in 1870 as
Manners and Customs at the Seashore. A critic
covering the exhibition for Harper's Weekly
commented: "The pictures are not wholly pleasing
perhaps the bathing scene—like another which he
has in the east room—is not quite refined." In the
woodcut the pantaloons have been rolled down to
conceal the legs of the figures, the dog has been
replaced by a seashell, and the background has been
altered. Goodrich points out that bathing was an
activity to be approached with caution at this time
and cites an article, "Long Branch—The American
Boulogne," accompanying another Homer
illustration in Every Saturday (August 26, 1871),
which examined the subject: "The question, to
bathe or not to bathe in public, will always remain
an open one. By taking proper precautions one can
be pretty sure of not outraging the proprieties, but
of not making oneself a ridiculous object,—a
spectacle to be derided and howled at,—who can be
sure?"

When the owner of High Tide approached
Homer to buy Low Tide he was told that the
picture had been painted out and the canvas reused
for another work.

15. On the Bluff at Long Branch, at the Bathing
Hour. Harper's Weekly, August 6, 1870. Wood
ingraving, 8 3/4 x 13 1/2 inches. Harris Brisbane
Dick Fund, 29.88.8(6)

16. On the Beach—Two are Company, Three are
None. Harper's Weekly, August 17, 1872. Wood
ingraving, 9 x 13 3/4 inches. Harris Brisbane Dick
Fund, 28.111.5(2)
This illustration in Harper's accompanied the
following anonymous poem:
And so at last I left them there,
And all unheeded went away,
Lest e'en the birds should read my heart,
As I had read myself that day.
Downes, Homer's biographer, noted: "I feel sure
that it will not be deemed extravagant praise to say
that the illustration is better than the poem."
Several of Homer's later paintings are distinguished
by their narrative content. Although he illustrated
about twenty-four books, Homer's illustrations for
magazines were usually unrelated to a text but were
independent features, such as engravings after his
paintings or observations of the everyday scene.

17. The Noon Recess. Harper's Weekly, June 28,
1873. Wood engraving, 9 x 13 3/4 inches. Harris
Brisbane Dick Fund, 29.88.9(2)

18. The Nooning. Harper's Weekly, August 16,
1873. Wood engraving, 9 x 13 3/4 inches. Harris
Brisbane Dick Fund, 29.88.9(4)

Weekly, August 23, 1873. Wood engraving by
Redding, 9 x 13 3/4 inches. Harris Brisbane Dick
Fund, 29.88.9(5)

September 20, 1873. Wood engraving by Lagarde, 13 1/2 x 20 1/2 inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 29.88.9(6)

Homer's attachment to country life found expression in his paintings and illustrations during the 1870s. The rural scene provided a counterpart to the more urbane amusements of fashionable summer resorts, and children were often the focal point of this rustic world.

In 1872 Homer painted two versions of his renowned composition Snap the Whip (Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio, and Metropolitan Museum). The Youngstown version, which differs from the other in the addition of another figure and the mountainous background, was exhibited at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876 and the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1878. Two drawings of the composition are in the collections of the Butler Institute of American Art and the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York. The engraving followed the version at Youngstown. In describing the painting Downes noted: "Nothing . . . had been quite so racy of the soil as this sturdy picture of a line of nine or ten barefoot boys holding hands and racing across a level common in front of a little rustic schoolhouse among the hills. . . . The landscape in 'Snap the Whip' is extremely rough and rugged, and unmistakably of Northern New England. There is something pungent and rude and bracing in the uncompromising naturalism of it."


Homer spent part of the summer of 1873 at Gloucester, Massachusetts. J. Eastman Chase, a friend, reported in Harper's Weekly (October 22, 1910) that Homer "[took] up his abode on 'Ten-Pound' Island, in Gloucester Harbor. He had persuaded Mrs. Merrill, the lighthouse-keeper's wife, to take him in, and here he lived for one summer, rowing across to the town only when in need of materials. The freedom from intrusion which he found in this little spot was precisely to his liking, and here he painted a large number of water-colors of uniform size, but of a wide range of boldly conceived and vigorously executed subjects." The series of watercolors dating from this period marks Homer's first intensive work in the medium, and many of the illustrations appearing in the fall issues of Harper's (nos. 21 and 22), as well as in the following year (no. 26), are based on watercolors and paintings from this visit to Gloucester. These are some of Homer's finest achievements as an illustrator. The luminosity of the watercolors is transformed into effective contrasting patterns of dark and light in these illustrations.


Published in 1874, the year preceding Homer’s last contribution to Harper's Weekly, Raid on a Sand-Swallow Colony, Gathering Berries, and Waiting for a Bite (nos. 25-27) are among Homer’s best works in the graphic medium. A more deliberate approach to composition and the studied disposition of contrasting values of light and dark distinguish these illustrations. The importance of cast shadows and their function in creating the illusion of volume is evident in many of Homer’s illustrations and paintings (see nos. 13 and 20), and especially so in Raid on a Sand-Swallow Colony. With the strong diagonals formed by the figures and its vertical format, this is one of the artist’s most original compositions.


28. Two Ladies. 1880. Pencil and watercolor, 6 15/16 x 7 15/16 inches. Gift in memory of Florence Baird Meyer, 18.123.3

29. Inside the Bar, Tynemouth (fig. 6). 1883. Pencil and watercolor, sight size 15 3/8 x 28 1/2 inches. Gift of Louise Ryals Arkell, in memory of her husband, Bartlett Arkell, 54.183

Inside the Bar, Tynemouth, dated 1883, after the artist’s return to America from two years in Tynemouth, England, is based on material gathered in the fishing village on the North Sea. A characteristic feature of Homer’s English studies is his monumental and idealized Tynemouth woman, who appears here as the focal point of a studied composition. The reflecting pool of water at her feet, a device Homer previously used in Low Tide (no. 14), takes the place of the cast shadow, a frequent motif in his illustrations (see no. 10). Working in blue, brown, and gray opaque watercolors, the artist records the changing climatic conditions of the North Sea coast. The work of this period, based on the daily life of North Sea fishermen and their families, marks a departure in subject matter and style from Homer’s earlier genre paintings and illustrations and anticipates the superlative marine studies of his later years.


This spontaneous pencil sketch of a Tynemouth woman is a detail from the central section of The
Incoming Tide (American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York), another watercolor based on Homer’s English trip. Both Inside the Bar, Tynemouth (no. 29) and The Incoming Tide were shown at the sixteenth annual exhibition of the American Water Color Society in 1883 and priced at $300 each. Many of the illustrations in the catalogue were from drawings made by the exhibiting artists, and this pencil sketch, inscribed “To Mr. Church [Frederick S. Church, a fellow artist and a member of the catalogue committee] with the compliments of the artist” and marked with instructions for printing, was specifically made for the catalogue. The enthusiastic critical reception of Homer’s English watercolors at this exhibition and at Boston in 1884 led Downes to comment that it “might . . . be called a turning-point in the artist’s career, so far as popular esteem is concerned.” Downes adds that a caricature of The Incoming Tide, exhibited in New York under the title “Hoope-lah! Dad’s Gone!” was seen by Homer who “was much amused by it.”


In 1884 Homer completed The Life Line, the first in a series of eight plates etched between 1884 and 1889 after his paintings and English watercolors. This group of etchings marks a major new phase in Homer’s graphic work. His training in etching was limited, and his New York printer, George W. H. Ritchie, was one of his chief advisers. The Life Line is based on a painting (Philadelphia Museum of Art) Homer completed in 1884. About 1886 the artist made an etching of a related painting called Undertow and in 1889 a second modified version of The Life Line called Saved. The subject was suggested by Homer’s study of rescue operations at Tynemouth and at Atlantic City in the early summer of 1883, when he studied the operation of the breeches buoy, used to rescue people from shipwrecked vessels. Most of the prints from this plate were made with dark green ink, suggesting, as Goodrich notes, the stormy water.


Eight Bells was etched in 1887 after Homer’s painting (Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover) of the preceding year. Unlike The Life Line (no. 31), in which a rescue at sea provides the dramatic content, the effectiveness of Eight Bells depends on Homer’s interpretation of the routine activity of two seamen taking observations with a sextant and a chronometer. The carefully conceived asymmetrical composition, the reduction of forms to patterns of light and dark, and the sculptural effect of the figures give this work a monumental quality, which distinguishes it as one of Homer’s finest etchings. Downes notes that he has reasons to believe that this etching was one of which Homer thought very highly.

33. Perils of the Sea (fig. 5). 1888. Etching, 16 1/2 x 22 inches. Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 24.39.5


Perils of the Sea, Mending the Tears, and A Voice from the Cliffs, etched in 1888, are based on Tynemouth watercolors dating from 1881, 1882, and 1883. Goodrich pointed out that all three etchings reverse the compositions of the watercolors. Both Perils of the Sea and A Voice from the Cliffs are consciously dramatic subjects. Mending the Tears, based on the watercolor Mending Nets: or, Far from Billingsgate (collection of Mrs. Solton Engel), shows two girls mending a net and a torn sock. The simplicity of the subject matter and the monumental quality of the representation recall Eight Bells (no. 32), and this etching equals that as one of Homer’s finest achievements in the medium. In a characteristic letter to M. Knoedler & Company, recorded by Goodrich, Homer wrote: “Mr. C. Klackner has for sale four etchings etched by myself, at the expense of two years time & hard work—‘The Life Line,’ ‘Peril on the Sea,’ ‘Eight Bells,’ ‘Mending Tears’—all of which are very good, and should have been put forward long ago, but C. Klackner is waiting for me to die, is my idea of the matter.” Homer’s hopes for financial success with his etchings, which ranged in price from $15 to $30, were disappointed, and after 1889 he abandoned etching.

36. Palm Tree, Nassau (fig. 7). 1898. Pencil and watercolor, 23 3/8 x 15 inches. Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 10.228.6

The year following his return from Europe, Homer settled at Prout’s Neck, a rocky peninsula on the coast of Maine, where he made his home until his death in 1910. From 1884 he often went south during the winter to Cuba, Nassau, Bermuda, or Florida. He devoted most of his time on these trips to watercolor painting and fishing. The watercolors dating from these trips are characterized by brilliant color effects and with his watercolors of the Adirondacks and Canada represent Homer’s finest work in the medium. One group of watercolors, which Homer considered his best work, was kept at Prout’s Neck, and Homer refused all offers to part with them. Twelve of these (nos. 36-47), were purchased by the Metropolitan after the artist’s
death. Palm Tree, Nassau was painted in the winter of 1898 during Homer’s second visit to Nassau. The brilliant clarity and depth of color as well as the effortless spontaneity of execution of this wind-swept scene demonstrate Homer’s distinctive mastery of the watercolor medium.

37. Hurricane, Bahamas. 1898. Watercolor, 14 1/2 x 21 inches. Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 10.228.7

38. A Wall, Nassau. 1898. Watercolor, 14 3/4 x 21 1/2 inches. Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 10.228.9

One of Homer’s most effective watercolors, A Wall, Nassau also dates from his second visit to Nassau. Homer varies the density and saturation of his strong clear colors from the opaque treatment of the foliage to the transparent washes of the sky and the wall. The opulent effect of red tropical flowers superimposed on the blue sky reveals his acute sensibility for color. The wall, rendered with transparent washes of gray and the white of the paper, dominates the composition of this unusually luminous watercolor.


40. Sloop, Bermuda. 1899. Watercolor, 15 x 21 1/2 inches. Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 10.228.3


In Shore and Surf, Nassau, Homer reproduces the spectacular effects of tropical waters in a brilliant array of turquoise blues, emerald greens, and deep ultramarines and effectively demonstrates his excellence as a colorist.

42. Nassau (fig. 8). 1899. Pencil and watercolor, 15 x 21 3/8 inches. Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 10.228.4

43. The Bather. 1899. Watercolor, 14 1/4 x 21 inches. Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 10.228.8

44. Flower Garden and Bungalow, Bermuda. 1899. Pencil and watercolor, 14 x 21 inches. Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 10.228.10

45. The Pioneer. 1900. Pencil and watercolor, 13 7/8 x 21 inches. Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 10.228.2

Homer visited the Adirondacks during the summers of 1870 and 1874. From the late 1880s he made several summer trips to the Adirondacks on both fishing and painting expeditions, often in the company of his brother Charles. Both were members of the North Woods Club in Minerva. In a letter to his sister-in-law, dated June 1900, Homer wrote: “The fishing is over here & I am sketching in watercolors.” The Pioneer of the same year is the only watercolor in the Museum’s collection of an Adirondacks subject. Although Homer continued to visit the Adirondacks from 1901 to 1908, Goodrich reports that it was just for the fishing, so The Pioneer is among Homer’s last watercolors of the north woods. The restricted palette of greens,
yellows, grays, browns, and blacks in The Pioneer contrasts with the brilliant range of colors in Homer’s tropical watercolors and characterizes the qualities of light and atmosphere of the north woods. In his marginal notes on the catalogue of the sixty-sixth exhibition of the Boston Art Club, Downes provided a perceptive summary of the watercolor: “Violent and crude, but pungent and powerful. Vivid light. Fresh and crisp. Cool, bracing air. . . . A rough bit of country.”


47. Fishing Boats, Key West. 1903. Pencil and watercolor, 13 5/8 x 21 1/2 inches. Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 10.228.1

In a letter to his brother Arthur, dated December 5, 1903, and recorded by Downes, Homer wrote: “I decide to go direct to Key West. . . . I know the place quite well, and it’s near the points in Florida that I wish to visit. I have an idea at present of doing some work, but do not know how long that will last. At any rate I will once more have a good feed of goat flesh and smoke some good cigars and catch some red snappers.” Taking on Wet Provisions and Fishing Boats, Key West date from this visit. The brilliantly dazzling effects of sunlight on water and the white boats and the radiant quality of the high-key palette Homer used in these two works are characteristic of the series of watercolors from Key West.


Following his visit to Key West, Homer proceeded to Homosassa on the Gulf of Mexico early in 1904. His brilliant watercolors of fish attest to the attractions of the area for fishermen. A series of watercolors and paintings of various species of fish and fishing subjects from Florida, the Adirondacks, and Canada celebrate Homer’s love of the sport: “He did not go in for expensive or elaborate tackle, but he usually caught the biggest fish,” Charles Homer reported. In a letter to his elder brother Arthur (Homer Collection, Bowdoin College Museum of Art), Homer described fishing at Homosassa as “the best in America” and provided sketches of various species of fish including Channel Bass, which he noted “look like a new $20 Gold Piece.” In his discussion of this watercolor, Downes noted: “A curious conceit of the artist was noticed in the last-named work, which showed a fish outlined against the blue waters of the sea. A string of bottles lay in the foreground; they were placed there evidently to show the relative size of the fish. ‘If any one in Maine buys the picture,’ said Homer, ‘I will remove the bottles.’”
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