

**Large
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**WINSLOW HOMER
CROSSCURRENTS**

**THE
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Gallery 899

Winslow Homer

Crosscurrents

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Hear artists, historians, and curators reflect on what makes Winslow Homer one of the most compelling and consequential painters of the nineteenth century. Scan the QR code to listen to the exhibition Audio Guide.



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Winslow Homer

Crosscurrents

Winslow Homer (1836–1910) chronicled some of the most turbulent and transformative decades of American history. He developed his distinctive artistic vision in a crucible of struggle, creating emblematic paintings that illuminate the effects of the Civil War (1861–65) on soldiers, formerly enslaved people, and the landscape. Turning to charged depictions of rural life, heroic rescues, and churning seas, Homer continued to grapple with themes of mortality and the often-uneasy relationship between humans and the natural world. Close study of his art reveals a lifelong preoccupation with conflict and uncertainty as well as persistent concerns with race and the environment.

Homer's iconic painting *The Gulf Stream* (1899, reworked by 1906), from The Met collection, is the inspiration for this exhibition. An allegory of human endurance amid the forces of nature, it also addresses the racial politics of the time and the imperialist ambitions of the United States. The Atlantic Ocean current of the title, visualized in the historical map at

right, links many of the locales where the artist explored the central themes of his art—from the Caribbean up the Eastern Seaboard, and across the ocean to Europe. By reconsidering Homer's dramatic pictures in the context of the Atlantic world, this exhibition encourages a deeper understanding of his full body of work, sophisticated artistry, and ability to distill challenging issues for diverse audiences, then and now.

[Audio Guide 650](#)

image captions:

Left:

Reproduction of “Gulf Stream and Drift,” from Matthew Fontaine Maury (American, 1806–1873), *The Physical Geography of the Sea*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1857. Image courtesy David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries

image description:

A large reproduction of a nineteenth-century map of the Atlantic Ocean notes locations on the east coast of the United States as well as features of the ocean like islands, currents, and areas of seaweed.

Right:

Reproduction of a photograph of Winslow Homer with *The Gulf Stream* in his studio in Prouts Neck, ca. 1899–1900. $4^{11/16} \times 6^{3/4}$ in. (11.91 × 17.15 cm). Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, Gift of the Homer Family

image description:

A balding man, Winslow Homer, with light skin tone and a mustache, holds a palette and stands in front of a painting on an easel, with other paintings on the wall behind him.

ON WALL TO LEFT, LEFT TO RIGHT

Sharpshooter

1863

Oil on canvas

Portland Museum of Art, Maine, Gift of Barbro and Bernard Osher (1992.41)

As a freelance illustrator, Homer traveled to the front lines in Virginia three times, documenting battlefields and the everyday lives of soldiers. *Sharpshooter*, his first significant work in oil, conveys the war's devastation in symbolic ways. Homer suggests the imminence of death as a Union soldier perched in a tree takes aim at his unseen target through a telescopic viewfinder. This modern technology allowed a sniper to strike an unsuspecting victim from up to a mile away. Homer later explained in a letter accompanied by a chilling sketch: "I looked through one of their rifles once . . . [the] impression struck me as being as near murder as anything I ever could think of in connection with the army & I always had a horror of that branch of the service."

image caption:

Sharpshooter from Homer's letter to George G. Briggs, February 19, 1896. Winslow Homer Collection, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

image description:

Black ink sketch of a man positioned in the center of a sniper's scope, in the middle of a page with cursive writing.

Defiance: Inviting a Shot before Petersburg

1864

Oil on panel

Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase with funds from Dexter M. Ferry, Jr.

Arguably the most provocative of Homer's Civil War paintings, this is the only one focused solely on the Confederate side. Set at the site of an extended period of trench warfare, it emphasizes the environmental devastation wrought by the conflict. Some interpreters have linked the young Confederate soldier recklessly taunting Union sharpshooters with a captive in the later *Prisoners from the Front*, on view nearby. The notable presence of a caricatured and enslaved Black figure playing a banjo in *Defiance* further distinguishes it from Homer's more sympathetic images of African American subjects displayed here. This disturbing element also complicates the "eyewitness" veracity often ascribed to wartime imagery by the artist, who nevertheless visited the Petersburg front on two occasions.

Near Andersonville

1865–66

Oil on canvas

The Newark Museum of Art, N.J., Gift of Mrs. Hannah Corbin Carter, Horace K. Corbin, Jr., Robert S. Corbin, William D. Corbin and Mrs. Clementine Corbin Day in memory of their parents Hannah Stockton Corbin and Horace Kellogg Corbin

In this quietly powerful painting, Homer explores the possibility of personal agency after the war. While the title refers to the site of a notorious Confederate prison in Georgia, the painting focuses on a Black woman emerging from a darkened interior, standing on a threshold and contemplating an uncertain future. In the distance at far left, Confederates carrying their battle flag march alongside captured Union soldiers. Homer's only Civil War picture to feature a woman of color, *Near Andersonville* offers a critical foil to the images centering White male soldiers that define his early production. The theme of the effects of the military outcome on formerly enslaved people is further explored in the artist's better-known Reconstruction-era paintings on view nearby.

WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION

Homer launched his professional artistic career amid conflict—specifically, the moral and political crisis of the American Civil War (1861–65). He moved from early work as a popular illustrator in Boston and New York to the front lines in Virginia with the Union Army. There, as a “special artist” for the journal *Harper’s Weekly*, he documented the war and made struggle a central theme of his art.

Homer was fundamentally changed by the experience of war and carried its aftereffects throughout his career. Prioritizing oil painting over illustration, he probed the emotional and physical extremes of the conflict and its culture of death in a series of haunting subjects—from *Sharpshooter* (1863) to *Prisoners from the Front* (1866), the work that established his reputation as a painter of pathos. This culminating expression of the reunited country’s uncertain future pointed the way to equally penetrating representations of newly emancipated Black Americans in the South. In these works from the end of Reconstruction—marked by the final withdrawal of federal troops from the former

Confederate states in 1877—Homer considered urgent questions of identity, labor, and citizenship, themes that also informed his depictions of White Americans in the 1870s.

Prisoners from the Front

1866

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. Frank B. Porter, 1922 (22.207)

Painted in his New York studio after the war, this work was inspired by the heroism of Homer's friend Francis Channing Barlow, a Union Army general who captured a division of Confederate soldiers at Spotsylvania, Virginia, in 1864. The artist summarized their confrontation against a ruined Southern landscape, while also implying class differences between the elegant officer in his sharp uniform and the disheveled Confederate troops. In 1869 critic Eugene Benson suggested that the painting transcended a specific event to portray the entirety of the war, noting that the prisoners represented "the elements in our Southern society that fomented and fed the rebellion against a beneficent and unaggressive Government."

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The Veteran in a New Field

1865

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Bequest of Miss Adelaide Milton de Groot, 1967 (67.187.131)

Completed in 1865, following the surrender of General Robert E. Lee and the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, this deeply symbolic painting embodies the tension between grief and hope after the war. A discarded Union Army jacket and canteen in the lower right corner identify the farmer as a veteran, and the “new field” of the title reminds us of his old one, the battlefield. This return to productive, peaceful pursuits echoes the biblical passage from Isaiah 2:4, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares.”

While the bountiful Northern harvest signifies renewal and recovery, the single-bladed scythe evokes the Grim Reaper. Pigment that has become transparent over time reveals that Homer originally painted a more elaborate scythe that he later simplified, intensifying its association with death.

The Brush Harrow

1865

Oil on canvas

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Mass.,
Anonymous Gift

One of Homer's most poignant Civil War subjects, *The Brush Harrow* depicts two children laboring to prepare a field for spring planting using an outmoded agricultural tool—a harrow made of tree branches. The quiet scene shows the war's human, socioeconomic, and environmental impact on the home front, where young boys do the work of absent men. It is one of three canvases of nearly the same size—along with *Prisoners from the Front* and *Veteran in a New Field* (both on view nearby)—that the artist painted in 1865. As a group, the works demonstrate the variety of Homer's symbolic approaches to rendering the epic conflict and its tragic and hopeful aftermath.

A Visit from the Old Mistress

1876

Oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of William T. Evans

This landmark work from Homer's Reconstruction-era period stands as one of the most compelling representations of race relations in nineteenth-century painting. In a frieze-like composition set in a murky interior, three Black freedwomen and a child appear in a tense encounter with the rigidly defined figure of an elderly White woman in widow's black—presumably the onetime “mistress” who must now pay for their labor. In its powerful evocation of lingering conflicts and traumas—with women and slavery at its center—the painting resonates with other images inspired by the artist's postwar visits to Virginia. Each offers a distinctive reflection on the future livelihoods of Black Americans.

The Cotton Pickers

1876

Oil on canvas

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Acquisition made possible through Museum Trustees: Robert O. Anderson, R. Stanton Avery, B. Gerald Cantor, Edward W. Carter, Justin Dart, Charles E. Ducommun, Camilla Chandler Frost, Julian Ganz, Jr., Dr. Armand Hammer, Harry Lenart, Dr. Franklin D. Murphy, Mrs. Joan Palevsky, Richard E. Sherwood, Maynard J. Toll, and Hal B. Wallis

The Cotton Pickers is Homer's most monumental representation, in form and content, of life for the newly emancipated in Reconstruction-era Virginia. Two sensitively rendered laboring women appear poised between their past, present, and future. The painting was admired in its time, not only in the United States but also in England; an English cotton merchant acquired it through an 1877 exhibition at New York's Century Club, fresh from Homer's studio.

The work's complexity—of figural characterization and intent—is grounded in themes of conflict and struggle as well as those of uncertainty and opportunity. Its title and the women's portrayal suggest a post-slavery

economy in which little had changed for many. Homer's friend, author-illustrator F. Hopkinson Smith, later wrote that the painting "haunted me for days," finding in the searching gaze of the figure at right "the whole story of Southern slavery."

Dressing for the Carnival

1877

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1922 (22.220)

In this Reconstruction-era painting, Homer evokes the dislocation and endurance of African American culture that was a legacy of slavery. The central figure represents a character from a Christmas celebration known as Jonkonnu, once observed by enslaved people in North Carolina and, possibly, eastern Virginia. Rooted in the culture of the British West Indies, the festival blended African and European traditions. After the Civil War, aspects of Jonkonnu were incorporated into Independence Day events; the painting's original title was *Sketch—4th of July in Virginia*. The theme of independence was particularly relevant in 1877, when emancipated Black Americans in the South saw an end to their brief experience of full civil rights with the final withdrawal of federal troops.

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OPPOSITE WALL, RIGHT TO LEFT

Snap the Whip

1872

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Christian A. Zabriskie, 1950 (50.41)

Snap the Whip celebrates the pleasures of childhood in a rough-and-tumble game. Homer's barefoot boys are in and of nature—determined, rugged, and exuberant—an optimistic symbol of the nation's future. The teamwork and coordination involved in their pursuit were seen as essential qualities for reuniting the country after war, though Homer hints at the challenges ahead through the child at the end, flung from the chain. The scene is infused with nostalgia, immortalizing the little red rural schoolhouse just as the nation was shifting away from its agrarian past toward a future of increased urbanization.

Weaning the Calf

1875

Oil on canvas

North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina

A rare image in Homer's art of Black and White children together, *Weaning the Calf* reveals his ongoing interest in evolving race relations following the Civil War. A Black youth attempts to lead a reluctant calf away from its mother, visible in the distance, as two White boys look on. Homer's composition enhances the scene's inherent tension, juxtaposing effort with inactivity, tattered clothing against tidy appearances. The theme of a child attempting to subdue an unruly animal aligns with the artist's many images of humans in conflict with nature across his career. In depicting a Black protagonist, Homer invites us to consider the youth's agency and self-determination during the era of Reconstruction.

Old Mill (The Morning Bell)

1871

Oil on canvas

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903

Homer's talent for creating ambiguity and tension in seemingly sunny narratives is on display here. This is one among many 1870s images by the artist that explore transformational social change in the post-Civil War era—in this case, the expanding role of White working-class women in the wage economy. At its fulcrum is a sunlit figure, lunch pail in hand, ascending a makeshift structure that leads to a mill, as a bell atop the roof sounds to signal the beginning of the workday. She may be new to economic necessity; her finer dress and pronounced separation from the other women in homespun evokes a tension between urban and rural communities in a rapidly industrializing nation.

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Crossing the Pasture

1871–72

Oil on canvas

Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Tex.

Children were seen as a poignant symbol of the nation's future in the years following the Civil War, because of its devastating death toll. Homer was one of many artists and writers, including Mark Twain and Louisa May Alcott, who celebrated the "cult of childhood" in their work. While Homer's charming vignette commemorates youthful innocence in an idyllic rural landscape, a sense of disquiet seeps into the picture. The figures, standing close together, wear uneasy expressions, with the older boy seeming to serve as a protective presence in relation to his young charge. The source of their apprehension is visible in the distance at left: a bull that seems to have noticed their attempt to traverse the field.

An Adirondack Lake

1870

Oil on canvas

Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, Horace C. Henry Collection

In Homer's sun-drenched landscape, the solitary man is a local woodsman-hunter-guide, a figure linked with nature. The artist made his first of more than twenty visits to the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York in 1870. The same year, Reverend William H. Murray published a best-selling guidebook to the region, extolling the virtues of the vast and unspoiled landscape—some six million acres of mountains, forests, and lakes—that was already becoming popular with people seeking leisure. Following in the footsteps of prior generations of American landscape painters including Frederic Church, John Kensett, and others, Homer was attracted to the region as a subject for his art, but he also was an avid outdoorsman who enjoyed fishing and hunting, often with his older brother, Charles.

Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)

1873–76

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of the W. L. and May T. Mellon Foundation (1943.13.1)

Homer developed this painting from sketches and watercolors he made during an 1873 visit to Gloucester, Massachusetts. He completed it in 1876, just as the nation celebrated its centennial. Over the course of three years, Homer had refined the composition, amplifying its optimistic symbolism by giving control of the rudder to one of the boys (instead of the man) and by adding an anchor on the bow representing security and hope. When the painting made its debut at the National Academy of Design in New York in 1876, it was recognized as a positive expression of the nation's future, an idea that is underscored by its original title, *A Fair Wind*, suggesting smooth sailing ahead.

Breezing Up is an early example of a motif that would fascinate Homer throughout his career—that of men at sea—from its cheerful origins in the 1870s to

more dire scenes such as *The Gulf Stream*,
decades later.

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OPPOSITE WALL, LEFT TO RIGHT

WATERSIDE

From 1867 until the mid-1880s, Homer maintained a studio in New York City. During an era of rapid urbanization, the artist chose to paint rural scenes instead of the bustle of city life. He followed travelers from different corners of society to resorts throughout the northeastern United States, from the Adirondack Mountains of New York to the beaches of Massachusetts. Homer may have been attracted to these locales for their pictorial splendor as well as their promise of solace, which he—and the nation—sorely needed after the trauma of wartime.

Homer often focused on the sea and shore as sites of leisure in the late 1860s and the 1870s. Inspired by an 1873 visit to the fishing village of Gloucester, Massachusetts, he conceived *Breezing Up* (1873–76), an optimistic image of men and boys at sea, a subject that would become a recurring motif in his work. In other oil paintings and watercolors of women and children near the coast, Homer considered humans' relationship with nature. These seemingly lighthearted

works also intimate darker themes, foreshadowing the artist's growing preoccupation with the risks involved in maritime life.

A Basket of Clams

1873

Watercolor on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Arthur G. Altschul, 1995 (1995.378)

At Gloucester, Homer produced a series of watercolors focusing on the daily activities of local children, whether boating, helping with chores, or playing among the dunes and wharves. In *A Basket of Clams*, one of the earliest watercolors by the artist in The Met collection, Homer depicts two boys lugging their haul across the beach. The smaller figure appears to eye the dead shark ahead, while his older companion looks back, seemingly at the sailboat behind them. These two details—the shark and the ship—cast a shadow on an otherwise bright scene, subtly gesturing to threats the youth of this fishing village might someday face at sea.

Waiting for Dad (Longing)

1873

Watercolor on wove paper

Mills College Art Museum, Oakland, Calif., Gift of Jane C. Tolman, 1912 (1912.2)

Imbued with subtle tension regarding parental absence and possible loss, this image echoes other Gloucester watercolors of young boys from the 1870s. A formative subject for Homer, the waiting child is an early example of the theme of anticipation and unknown outcomes that would pervade his later renderings of seaside communities, especially the more ominous pictures of Cullercoats, England. The artist repeated the motif in an oil of the same year, suggesting a more hopeful conclusion with the title *Dad's Coming!*. Yet tragedy was common in the Massachusetts fishing village; during Homer's visit there in August 1873, a single storm destroyed nine fishing vessels, and 128 sailors did not return home.

image caption:

Winslow Homer, *Dad's Coming!*, 1873. Oil on wood.

The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon

image description:

A boy sits on the edge of a boat on the shore. He looks to the left out to the open sea, with sailing ships on the horizon. A mother figure carrying an infant in a red coat stands to the boy's right.

How Many Eggs?

1873

Watercolor on paper

Collection of Karen and Kevin Kennedy

This is among the most vibrant and compositionally daring of Homer's Gloucester watercolors. It also reveals his early and enduring fascination with the conflict between humans and nature; here, youthful curiosity threatens the fragile eggs of a sand-swallow colony in the dunes. The sophisticated verticality of the image, with its precariously positioned, active subjects, distinguishes it from the artist's more placid scenes of childhood produced during his formative summer of 1873.

Eagle Head, Manchester, Massachusetts (High Tide)

1870

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Mrs. William F. Milton, 1923 (23.77.2)

In the years after the Civil War, Homer often explored women's new roles in society, especially their access to leisure. This representation of a quintessentially modern subject—women at the beach—confounded critics when it was first exhibited, in New York in 1870. Emerging after a swim, the woman at center wrings out her heavy bathing clothes and hair, as a small dog appears startled by the dripping water. Some viewers focused on issues of decorum and class, criticizing the women's state of undress—even though they are wearing typical bathing costumes of the era—and one described them as “exceedingly red-legged and ungainly.” A disquieting sense of voyeurism and mystery imbues the scene, amplified by the strong light and strange shadows, suggesting deeper meanings below the surface.

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Promenade on the Beach

1880

Oil on canvas

Michele and Donald D'Amour Museum of Fine Arts, Springfield, Mass., Gift of the Misses Emily and Elizabeth Mills in memory of their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Mills

Promenade on the Beach is one of Homer's most distinctive paintings of women and the sea. A self-consciously decorative work, it reveals his interest in the progressive Aesthetic Movement that attracted many Americans at the time. Homer creates an enigmatic contrast between two artistically dressed figures gazing longingly out to sea and the threatening blue-gray sky, anticipating his later elemental works of natural conflict. The transitional painting evokes the artist's earlier Gloucester watercolors while also recalling the mysterious mood of modern women at the beach from *Eagle Head, Manchester, Massachusetts*, on view nearby. A critic of the day noted the seascape's suggestion of "romances" with the inclusion of the women, which he felt made a "poem" of the painting.

ON WALL TO RIGHT, RIGHT TO LEFT

RESCUE

In the spring of 1881, Homer traveled to England. After briefly exploring London's art collections, he settled in the North Sea fishing community of Cullercoats for a transformative residency. Inspired by the daily life-and-death experiences of local women and men inextricably tied to the ocean, the artist produced a number of dramatic oil paintings and watercolors focused on the subjects of danger and rescue.

Returning to the United States nineteen months later, Homer invested his art with a newfound gravitas and his figures with greater weight and feeling, as in *The Life Line* (1884). In his epic scenes of laboring fishermen in the North Atlantic—for example, *The Fog Warning* (1885)—the artist highlighted gender and class dimensions of sea peril, modern heroism, and human vulnerability in the face of the dynamic power of nature. Composed with pronounced tension and ambiguity, these works surface themes that would consume him for the rest of his career.

The Wreck of the Iron Crown

1881

Watercolor, graphite, and charcoal on paper

Private collection, on extended loan to The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA R.8613.2)

On October 20, 1881, news spread throughout the community of Cullercoats, England, that a storm had caused the sailing ship *Iron Crown* to run aground at nearby Tynemouth harbor. Homer hurried to the scene, where he recorded the rescue effort in this watercolor. The town's lifesaving brigade had rowed out earlier to save twenty stranded crew members; the artist arrived just as the same rescuers risked their lives again to retrieve a sailor who had been left behind. With his illustrator's eye for detail, Homer pictures the lone figure's tiny form waving for help, while the lifeboat cleaves through heavy surf. Though he had alluded to the perils of the sea in earlier illustrations and watercolors, this is one of Homer's first paintings to depict an actual rescue.

The Life Brigade

ca. 1882

Oil on canvas

Myron Kunin Collection of American Art, Minneapolis

At Cullercoats, Homer painted almost exclusively in watercolor; this remarkably bold oil sketch was likely produced after his return to the United States. Inspired by scenes of rescue and his admiration for the local volunteer lifesaving crews that he had witnessed in action, the artist evokes a transitional moment as the team on shore anticipates their encounter with a roiling sea. Broadly painted and pared down to the most essential narrative details, the work emphasizes imminent danger, adventure, and nature's threat.

Inside the Bar

1883

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Louise Ryals Ariel, in memory of Bartlett Arkell, 1954 (54.183)

On large sheets of paper such as the one used for this work—produced on his return to the United States but depicting a North Sea fisherwoman—Homer perfected traditional English watercolor techniques, laying out compositions with broad, overlapping washes of color. Critically praised when it was exhibited in New York, *Inside the Bar* is seen as a benchmark of the ambitious turn in Homer’s art, foregrounding heroicized figures engaged in dramatic action. Viewers were particularly taken with the power of the woman, positioned between two boats bearing men: “This woman is not made of the stuff that is swept away. . . . She is transformed by the terrible beauty of the time and place; her stride is magnificent; she is part of the storm itself.”

[**Audio Guide 656**](#)

Perils of the Sea

1881

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., Acquired by Sterling and Francine Clark, 1927

During his time at Cullercoats, Homer captured the rhythm of daily life in the village. He often located his paintings at the harbor and along the water's edge, where the community awaited the return of fishermen from their labor on the harsh North Sea. In these works, Homer celebrated the rugged fortitude of the "fishwives," whom he depicted with a new monumentality, possibly inspired by the Greek sculpture and other European art he had seen in London. Here, he focused on two women to convey the distress caused by the unpredictable whims of nature. From the shore, they scan the horizon for their absent loved ones and anticipate their uncertain return with an anxiety echoed by the dim skies and turbulent waves.

The Gale

1883–93

Oil on canvas

Worcester Art Museum, Mass., Museum Purchase (1916.48)

The Gale is Homer's culminating image of Cullercoats fisherwomen. He radically reworked the composition over the course of a decade to clarify the subject as a vigorous depiction of the heroic strength of women against the elements—a counterpoint to his many oils of men engaged in timeless struggle. In an earlier version of the painting, which was roundly denounced by critics on its exhibition at New York's National Academy of Design, the woman and child were just one element of a scene that included Cullercoats' Life Brigade House, men in foul-weather gear, and a sizable boat. When the repainted work was exhibited in 1893, only the main figural group (which he had transported from England to the coast of Prouts Neck, Maine) remained.

image caption:

Winslow Homer, *The Coming Away of the Gale*, ca. 1883.

Albumen print. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Gift of the Homer Family

image description:

A woman, standing against the wind, carries an infant on her back; to her left is a small boat tied to a dock, with its stern in the water behind her.

The Life Line

1884

Oil on canvas

Philadelphia Museum of Art, The George W. Elkins Collection,
1924

A culmination of lessons learned abroad, this transitional representation of the artist's new style and approach to epic subjects also exemplifies the theme of struggle in the face of nature. The compelling work was apparently inspired by an event Homer had witnessed in Atlantic City, New Jersey, during the summer of 1883 (soon after his return from England). The rescuer employs the recently invented breeches buoy, by which a victim could be transferred to safety via a system of ropes and pulleys. *The Life Line* was critically acclaimed in the National Academy's 1884 annual exhibition and purchased by the New York collector Catharine Lorillard Wolfe for \$2,500, the most money the artist had earned from any of his art to date.

[Audio Guide 657](#)

Undertow

1886

Oil on canvas

Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., Acquired by Sterling and Francine Clark, 1924

In this dramatic if curiously hushed scene—allegedly based on the same event in Atlantic City that inspired the earlier *The Life Line*—rescuers struggle to bring ashore two semiconscious women, weighed down by their waterlogged bathing dresses. Long viewed as an outcome of Homer's informal studies abroad—with its sensuously modeled figures evocative of classical sculpture—the composition consumed him for more than three years; a series of pencil drawings reveals how he experimented with the figural placement.

Foregrounding human frailty in the face of the ocean's force, *Undertow* possesses a visual power that resides in its intense narrative and formal ambition. As one critic observed on its New York display, “The picture is a masterpiece; it lacks but a breath to make it monumental.”

image caption:

Winslow Homer, *Standing Man Looking Toward Two Drowning Figures (Study for "Undertow")*, ca. 1886. Graphite on paper. Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., Acquired by Sterling and Francine Clark, 1925

image description:

A pencil sketch of a man standing in turbulent water, looking at two drowning figures who have their arms wrapped around each other.

The Fog Warning (Halibut Fishing)

1885

Oil on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Anonymous gift with credit to the Otis Norcross Fund

Homer often represented the arduous labor of North Atlantic fishermen, based on his experiences at Cullercoats and amplified by observations made around his home on the coast of Maine. In one series of paintings (also including *Lost on the Grand Banks*, hanging nearby, and *The Herring Net*, shown below), he explored the inherent dangers of fishing the Grand Banks, the rich waters southeast of Newfoundland, where the cold Labrador Current converges with the relatively warm Gulf Stream. The meeting of these currents provides a fertile environment for fish, but it also makes the area one of the foggiest places on earth. This painting is infused with tension as the solo fisherman gazes toward the safety of the distant schooner and considers his ability to reach it before the fog, looming on the horizon, settles.

image caption:

Winslow Homer, *The Herring Net*, 1885. Oil on canvas. The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection.
Image: The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY

image description:

Two men—one with his back to the viewer and the other facing towards the viewer—lift a net full of fish into a small boat on a rough sea, with sailing ships in the background.

Eight Bells

1886

Oil on canvas

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., Gift of anonymous donor (1930.379)

This painting's title refers to ships' timekeeping methods, which are arranged in four-hour watch shifts. Eight rings of the bell signify the end of a shift at 4, 8, and 12 a.m. and p.m. (each toll represents thirty minutes). Here, two sailors record the vessel's location in rough seas using a sextant and a chronometer, astronomical instruments for calculating longitude from the horizon and celestial objects. Homer expressed interest in writings by oceanographer Matthew Maury (1806–1873), who connected scientific measurement with divine order. The depiction of the sailors' everyday work thus becomes a meditation on humankind's struggle to comprehend nature.

ON WALL TO LEFT

Lost on the Grand Banks

1885

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Strikingly simple and forceful in its compositional focus—one writer referred to it as “an element of greatness”—this mature work completes a trio of visual tales of labor, conflict, and disaster, including *The Fog Warning*, on view nearby, and *The Herring Net* (1885, Art Institute of Chicago). A celebrated painting during Homer’s lifetime, *Lost on the Grand Banks* is also the most unusual of these “noble epic” images of North Atlantic fishermen. It features a stark confrontation between men and nature as well as an implication of unknown fates, with Homer’s protagonists negotiating survival amid the darkest shades of despair. In this way, it anticipates the inconclusive narrative and “grim intensity” a viewer ascribed to *The Gulf Stream* more than a decade later.

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NO PHOTOGRAPHY



ON WALL TO LEFT

Ship's Boat

1883

Watercolor on paper

New Britain Museum of American Art, Conn., Charles F. Smith Fund

Homer shows several sailors caught in the crest of a wave, struggling to right their capsized dory (a small, flat-bottomed rowboat). They scabble against the vessel with their hands, desperately attempting to gain purchase before they crash against the looming rocks. Homer elaborated the context for this disastrous scene in a preparatory drawing, writing that the view was seen “from the retina of a drowned man.” This explanation forecloses the possibility of rescue for the protagonist, as his fate is evidently sealed.

TO LEFT, ON LEFT SIDE OF FREESTANDING WALL

Signal of Distress

1890–96

Oil on canvas

Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Though Homer's paintings were always informed by the sum of his experiences, in the 1890s he began intentionally mining his past sketches for inspiration. For *Signal of Distress*, in which a group of sailors prepares to launch a lifeboat during a storm, the artist may have returned to studies he made on his journey to England aboard the steamship *Parthia* in 1881, merging them with other observations of the sea and rescues accumulated over the years. Between first exhibiting the painting in 1891 and selling it in 1896, Homer altered the composition to create a more desperate scene. Notably, the distressed boat on the horizon, originally shown in full sail, now appears with neither sail nor any indication of human presence, nearly subsumed by waves.

ON WALL TO LEFT, RIGHT TO LEFT

To the Rescue

1886

Oil on canvas

The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., Acquired 1926

An innovative summary of the rescue theme, this work is distinguished by its ambiguous narrative and composition. The painting, with its subdued, almost monochromatic tonal palette and minimal detail, reduces the urgent confrontation between people and nature to the essentials. Homer referred to it as a “sketch” inspired by a wreck he witnessed along a treacherous shoreline of sand dunes not far from his studio in Prouts Neck, Maine. He described it as “having the look of being made at once . . . interesting as a quick sketch from nature.” A leading collector of modern American and European art, Duncan Phillips, acquired *To the Rescue* in 1926. He admired the painting for its “dramatic suggestion,” meaning the primacy of aesthetic concerns over a clear storyline.

The Wrecked Schooner

ca. 1900–1910

Watercolor and charcoal on paper

Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum Purchase (25:1938)

Inspired by a wreck off the coast of Prouts Neck, Maine, Homer rendered this image of a storm-tossed schooner caught between rocks and a raging sea. The artist shows only the remnants of the boat, with no sign of a life brigade, departing from the approach he had taken in paintings of similar subjects in the 1880s and 1890s. Homer brought a similarly pessimistic mindset to the initial composition of *The Gulf Stream*, which originally included no indication of possible rescue on the horizon. Among his last and most decisive shipwreck pictures, *The Wrecked Schooner* may also be one of the artist's final works in watercolor.

“I expect some fine things, it is certainly the richest field for an Artist that I have seen.”

—Winslow Homer, 1885

ALONG THE GULF STREAM

From the mid-1880s until his death in 1910, Homer often sought refuge from the harsh winters at his home in Prouts Neck, Maine, by traveling to tropical destinations. He visited the Bahamas, which he called “the best place I’ve found,” as well as Cuba, Florida, and Bermuda. During these trips Homer painted in watercolor, an ideal medium for representing the brilliant tropical light, sparkling blue water, dramatic changes in weather, and verdant foliage that captivated him.

Though contemporary viewers and critics admired the beauty and skill of these watercolors, they were deemed less significant than his oil paintings. One critic described them as “memoranda of travel—mere rapid studies and sketches, not complete pictures”

and overlooked the significance of Homer's subjects. In the Bahamas, the artist focused on the daily lives and labors of the islands' Black inhabitants. During his stay in Cuba in 1885, he witnessed the ongoing struggle for independence from Spain and highlighted aspects of colonial history in his images. Similarly, Homer's vibrant landscapes of Bermuda contain references to the British colonial presence on the island, including red-coated soldiers. These dazzling watercolors suggest a tropical paradise while also hinting at complicated imperial forces and natural threats.

Oranges on a Branch

1885

Watercolor on paper

Erving and Joyce Wolf Collection

Many of Homer's images of the Bahamas evoke the idea of the islands as a paradise created especially for tourists. Enjoying local fruits was perceived as a fundamental luxury of the visitor experience, as one contemporary guidebook noted: "Oranges to daily break our fast in the morning, and delightfully crown our afternoon meal, are felt to be a necessity. Without them the most elaborate feast fails to satisfy." This vibrant watercolor, a rare still life by the artist, offers a complete sensory experience—ripe citrus, bright green leaves, and fragrant blossoms are bathed in warm sunlight.

Rest

1885

Watercolor on paper

Private collection

Homer's first trip to the Bahamas is commonly believed to have been precipitated by a commission to illustrate an article for *Century Magazine*. Yet the details of this assignment remain unsubstantiated and were never mentioned by the artist. It seems possible that Homer visited the islands of his own volition and that his images were linked to the article after the trip. Titled "A Midwinter Resort," the essay touted the pleasures of the Bahamas for travelers from the United States. Women carrying baskets of fruit on their heads were a popular trope in tourist images of the Bahamas. This watercolor of a vendor who pauses on her journey to market, setting down her produce-filled tray atop a characteristic wall, was one of the works reproduced in the magazine.

A Garden in Nassau

1885

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on wove paper

Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago, Daniel J. Terra Collection (1944.10)

In the years following the U.S. Civil War, the Bahamas sought to revive their economy with tourism. Hoping to attract wealthy visitors, especially from the nearby United States, advertising campaigns celebrated the islands as picturesque tropical paradises and promoted the healthful, restorative climate as a refuge from winter weather up north. Homer's vibrant watercolor, intended for viewers back home, celebrates the lush, verdant landscape while also suggesting the exclusion of Black islanders from aspects of Bahamian society. The coral and limestone wall, traditionally used to enclose the gardens of Nassau's private residences, separates the child from the landscape beyond. Homer originally included two additional figures attempting to climb over the gate to retrieve coconuts but later edited them out.

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Native Hut at Nassau

1885

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, 1994

Homer first arrived in Nassau, the capital city of the Bahamas, with his father in December 1884. He was lured to the area, then a British Crown colony, by the tropical climate and pictorial possibilities. After settling into his luxury hotel, Homer explored the Black settlements outside the city. This watercolor of a Bahamian residence reveals a mix of African and European architectural traditions that reflects the hybrid cultures of the Caribbean and the legacy of slavery, which had been abolished there in 1838. By concentrating on picturesque details that he believed would appeal to viewers in the States—the thatched roof, the lush foliage (including a soaring coconut palm), a rooster, and a bright blue, cloud-filled sky—Homer aestheticized the structural racism and economic difficulties faced by Black Bahamians.

ON WALL TO LEFT

Shark Fishing

1885

Watercolor on paper

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Stan Druckenmiller

Homer was fascinated by the daily lives of Bahamians and made a series of watercolors showing them engaged in their work at sea. For islanders who made their living on the water, sharks were both prey and predator. A contest between humans and nature is captured in this scene of two fishermen attempting to reel in a large shark. During Homer's visit to the Bahamas, the local newspaper reported that a shark "measuring about eleven feet" was caught and brought to the Royal Victoria Hotel—where the painter was staying—for inspection. A similarly posed shark appears in preparatory studies he made fifteen years later when developing the composition for *The Gulf Stream*.

ON OPPOSITE SIDE OF FREESTANDING WALL

Sponge Fishermen, Bahamas

1885

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper

Private collection

In the late nineteenth century, sponging was the main industry of the Bahamas. At its peak around 1900, about one-third of the total male Bahamian workforce was employed in the business, which exported over a million pounds of sponges per year, mainly to North America and Europe as popular bath items. Homer presents a distant view, likely of the Nassau Sponge Exchange, the epicenter of the islands' trade. As Black fishermen return to port after an expedition, the White merchants survey the bountiful harvest from the dock. Homer's sunlit composition, which takes place under brilliant blue skies and towering palms, is picturesque rather than critical and reveals no hint of the arduous conditions and meager wages.

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ON WALL TO LEFT, RIGHT TO LEFT

Customs House, Santiago de Cuba

1885

Watercolor on paper

Private collection, Houston, Tex.

As the title indicates, this watercolor represents the *aduana* (customs house), where the Spanish colonial government collected tariffs on imported goods. One of Homer's most accomplished architectural studies from his 1885 trip to Cuba, it adopts a ground-level view of the building's arched colonnade, rather than depicting the imposing facade. On the balcony, several women waving colorful fans appear behind an intricately drawn balustrade. At left, the Spanish flag directs the viewer's gaze down to the Spanish army, silhouetted with bayonets in the distance. Their presence recalls Homer's observation that Cuba—then embroiled in a series of wars for independence—was a “red hot place full of soldiers.”

Lady of Santiago (Spanish Girl with a Fan)

1885

Watercolor on paper

Mr. and Mrs. Richard Lockwood Chilton, Jr.

From the Bahamas, Homer sailed to Cuba, another popular destination for U.S. travelers in the northern Caribbean Sea. He arrived in Santiago de Cuba in February 1885. In this watercolor, the artist depicts a *criolla* (a Cuban woman of Spanish descent) wearing a black lace *mantilla* (veil) and holding an *abanico* (fan), both highly prized accessories often imported from Spain. The anonymous sitter, whom Homer referred to only as the “Lady of Santiago,” casts a sidelong glance from behind her fan, her expression inscrutable. Together, the accessories, the tropical flora, and the woman’s half-covered face show Homer’s adoption of established visual tropes that cast Cuba as “exotic” and underscored Spain’s cultural influence on the island.

The Cock Fight

1885

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Art Institute of Chicago, George F. Harding Collection
(1982.1579)

Homer's *Cock Fight* pictures the dramatic moment immediately following a young rooster's conquest of an older, fully plumed foe. Feathers cover the ground and fresh blood spatters the plaster wall behind them. The artist captured this subject while visiting Cuba—where cockfighting was a notable feature of the island's colonial culture—but he omits any sign of the blood sport's wider arena. Gamecocks were typically “matched” by weight, but not so here. Could Homer have intended the watercolor to symbolize the power struggle over Cuban independence? Works like this one may have been deliberately ambiguous, given the colony's fraught political situation, then a prominent issue of debate in the United States.

The Bather

1899

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1910 (10.228.8)

During his second visit to the Bahamas in 1898–99, Homer, then sixty-two years old, seems to have reveled in depicting the bodies of vigorous Black men glistening in warm water and sunlight. It is significant that Homer foregrounded these individuals' strength and sensuality in his art, especially in the context of the Bahamas, which were promoted as a respite for sickly White tourists to regain their health. Inherent in the images is a tension related to racial politics and class disparities, as the older White artist recorded the robust young Black men. This apparent moment of leisure is situated beneath the Union Jack, an intentional reminder of the Bahamas' position as a British Crown colony.

The Turtle Pound

1898

Watercolor and graphite on paper

Brooklyn Museum, Sustaining Membership Fund, Alfred T. White Memorial Fund, and A. Augustus Healy Fund

Compared to Homer's watercolors from his first trip to the Bahamas, those from his second visit are painted with more confidence and immediacy. This bolder approach is especially evident in works where flowing pigment transforms into undulating waves of the sea, as in this image of two men transferring a turtle into a holding tank. Artist and viewer are level with the workers wrangling their prey in the turquoise water. Intense sunlight highlights the animal's exposed underbelly. But the image is about more than the men's labor. A traditional food of the West Indies, turtles had become a luxury delicacy for export to the United States and Britain over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were associated with empire.

Nassau

1899

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1910 (10.228.4)

In this dazzling watercolor of Bahamian men either heading out to or returning from their work at sea, Homer included discarded cannons—artifacts from one of the island’s British forts—splayed across the beach. One contemporary guidebook noted that these symbols of colonial history had become tourist attractions. Homer’s interest in this imperial legacy corresponds to the increasing U.S. presence in the region and on the world stage. At lower left, the artist indicated that the watercolor was painted on January 1, 1899, a significant date. Under the provisions of the 1898 Treaty of Paris, which established the end of the Spanish-Cuban-American war, January 1 marked the day Spain relinquished control of Cuba and the United States began its military occupation of the island.

ON RIGHT SIDE OF WALL TO LEFT, LEFT TO RIGHT

A Wall, Nassau

1898

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1910 (10.228.9)

A Wall, Nassau recalls watercolors from Homer's first journey to the Bahamas and demonstrates his continued interest in the boundaries between public and private spaces. The exuberant palette of the poinsettia blossoms, foliage, sky, and sea contrast with the pale washes the artist used to suggest sunlight and shadow across the characteristic wall. At left, the gate stands open, implying a welcoming human presence and offering a hint of the landscape beyond. With the dark shards of glass lining the top of the wall, however, Homer highlights barriers intended to deter trespassers.

Natural Bridge, Bermuda

ca. 1901

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1910 (10.228.12)

Homer paid particular attention to Bermuda's distinctive coastline. Formed by volcanic activity millions of years earlier, the rocky cliffs and ledges fascinated the artist. Eroded by the sea into dramatic and picturesque formations, like this natural bridge, the layers of limestone suggest ancient geological time, which will continue to be washed away through environmental change. Homer situates the landscape in his current moment by including a red-coated British soldier in the lower right corner. Perched above the bridge, he appears to be keeping watch over the ocean. In this bold composition, the artist suggests the sparkling vastness of tropical water with limpid passages of vibrant watercolor.

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Flower Garden and Bungalow, Bermuda

1899

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1910 (10.228.10)

Art and fishing brought Homer to the British Crown colony of Bermuda for six weeks in winter 1899–1900. More than almost any other watercolor made during his sojourn, this image of a typical bungalow and its lush garden encodes the visual pleasures of the tropical environment. As in the Bahamas and Cuba, Homer focused on the local architecture: here, the stepped white limestone roof, used for collecting rainwater, and vibrantly colored walls. He also reveled in representing the picturesque landscape, including the border of bright flowers, verdant palms, sparkling water, and sunny sky. This work belongs to a group of watercolors of tropical subjects that the artist exhibited to acclaim at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, and later reserved for The Met, which purchased them after his death in 1910.

Coral Formation

1901

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

Worcester Art Museum, Mass., Museum Purchase

In Bermuda, Homer often focused on sites of natural splendor, including the island's characteristic coral formations, as well as their geopolitical context. For much of the nineteenth century, Bermuda was the site of the British Navy's headquarters in North America and the West Indies, and Homer's watercolors often gesture to this military presence across the archipelago. Here, two red-coated soldiers, visible atop the coral formation at left, point across the water toward the Royal Dockyards on the distant horizon at right. Their brilliant jackets form a striking note against the vibrant azure water.

“The subject of this picture is comprised in its title.”

—Winslow Homer, 1902

THE GULF STREAM

Initially inspired by Homer’s first trip to the Bahamas and Cuba in 1884–85, *The Gulf Stream* is an epic scene of conflict between humankind and nature. Conceived with great ambition and developed over more than twenty years—from the earliest sketch to the painting’s purchase by The Met in 1906—it is one of his most complicated and consequential works. *The Gulf Stream* has been understood variously as a personal reflection of Homer’s sense of isolation after the death of his father, and as a more universal rumination on mortality and the overwhelming power of the natural world—fundamental themes that the artist examined across his career. As Homer’s only major Caribbean seascape painted in oil and the only one to depict a Black figure, it also references complex social and political issues, including the

legacy of slavery and imperialism in the wake of the 1898 Spanish-Cuban-American War. When Homer explained to a dealer that “the subject of this picture is comprised in *its title*,” he underscored his focus on the mighty Atlantic Ocean current, its larger ecosystem, and its historical significance. Homer used the Gulf Stream as the setting for many of his most powerful paintings.

Sharks (The Derelict)

1885

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the Estate of Helen Babbott Sanders

During his visits to the Bahamas, Homer may have seen, heard, or read about human encounters with sharks, as several incidents were reported in the local newspaper, the *Nassau Guardian*. Shortly after the artist arrived in Nassau in 1885, the paper published an eyewitness account of a man “swallowed by an enormous shark” after a boating accident. In this watercolor, the absence of people invites speculation that the swarming creatures have been successful predators. As is often the case in Homer’s work, the precise narrative is unclear. Compositionally, this watercolor is an important predecessor to the final painting of *The Gulf Stream*.

The Gulf Stream

Probably 1899

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection

In the autumn of 1899, about seven months after he returned from a second trip to the Bahamas, Homer wrote a friend: “I painted in watercolors three months last winter at Nassau . . . & have now just commenced arranging a picture from some of the studies.” In this watercolor, probably created around that time, Homer brings together the essential elements that appear in the finished oil painting (on view nearby): a solitary figure stranded on the deck of a dramatically tilted, dismasted boat as a massive shark menaces. To create this work—and the final composition of *The Gulf Stream*—Homer also revisited sketches and watercolors from his first trip to the Bahamas, fifteen years earlier, several of which are also displayed in this gallery.

Study for *The Gulf Stream*

1898–99

Watercolor and chalk on wove paper

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, New York, Gift of Charles Savage Homer, Jr.

In this remarkable watercolor, Homer studied details of the bow of *The Gulf Stream's* boat. Significantly, he indicated the precise arrangement of the brightly colored stalks of sugarcane across the deck. By placing sugarcane at the center of his composition and writing that “the subject of this picture is comprised in its title,” Homer made an unequivocal reference to the institution of slavery. Sugar was a central commodity in the triangular trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, and the Gulf Stream current played an essential role in both its conveyance and the trafficking of enslaved people. The study also includes the damaged mast and gunwale (the upper edge of the vessel's side), which he would later edit somewhat in the oil painting.

Fishing Boats, Key West

1903

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1910 (10.228.1)

Although Homer's title identifies this watercolor as Key West, Florida, it appears to show typical Bahamian fishing boats. From the seventeenth century, Bahamians had frequently traveled back and forth to Florida, and Key West is only about 280 miles west of Nassau, across the Gulf Stream. Following the U.S. Civil War, many Black Bahamians migrated to Key West, where they found familiar work (including turtling and salvaging). Here, Homer achieved brilliant atmospheric effects through the rapid application of fluid washes and the carefully calculated use of his white paper, which he reserved to indicate the boat's side, sails, and light reflecting on the water. Lyrical graphite lines, especially evident in the rigging and sails, seem to imply a sea breeze.

Channel Bass

1904

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, George A. Hearn Fund, 1952 (52.155)

In January 1904, Homer arrived in Homosassa, a village on Florida's Gulf Coast. Declaring the fishing there "the best in America," the artist-outdoorsman also capitalized on the activity's creative potential, as he had during previous angling expeditions in the Adirondacks and Canada. This watercolor features a channel bass, whose sparkling scales Homer likened to "a \$20 gold piece." In a nod to the Homosassa River's famously clear, shallow water, the artist surrounded the fish with layers of transparent lapis-blue wash. The luminous jewel tones belie harsher realities: the bass appears to have been "foul-hooked" (caught outside the mouth), its connection to the line precarious. Glass bottles in the river amplify the sense of human encroachment on the environment, while also providing an indication of scale.

In a Florida Jungle

1885–86

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

Worcester Art Museum, Mass., Museum Purchase

After trips to the Bahamas and Cuba in 1885, Homer ventured south again the following winter, this time stopping in Tampa, Key West, and the Saint Johns River basin. While in Florida, he showcased the state's rich biodiversity in verdant landscapes glimpsed from the water. Here, the artist details a palmetto grove in the middle distance, framed by a sandy beach, towering palms, and moss-draped oaks. Two vultures soar in the roiling skies above, alerting the viewer to the mortal confrontation unfolding in the foreground, where an alligator stalks a large pink wading bird known as a roseate spoonbill.

In the Jungle, Florida

1904

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

Brooklyn Museum, Museum Collection Fund and Special Subscription

The dense composition and dark, saturated passages of pigment express foreboding, a mood Homer often brought to landscapes he made of Florida's waterways, swamplands, and forests. Like the earlier watercolor *In a Florida Jungle* hanging nearby, this work interprets the natural world as fraught with danger: lurking deep within the swamp forest's tangled vines, brackish water, and sharp palmetto fronds, a panther bares its teeth at an unseen threat or prey.

ON WALL TO RIGHT

The Gulf Stream

1899, reworked by 1906

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1906 (06.1234)

In Homer's epic saga set along the Gulf Stream, a Black man faces his possible demise on the deck of a distressed boat while threatened by sharks and a waterspout. This painting is the culminating expression of various deeply personal and universal themes that Homer explored across his career, particularly the conflict between humans and the natural environment. Completed at the dawn of the twentieth century and during what historians have called the nadir of race relations in the United States, *The Gulf Stream* is also rich with geopolitical implications. Homer acknowledged the expanded imperial ambitions of the United States beyond North America with the addition of key elements. Splayed across the ship's deck are stalks of sugarcane—the Caribbean commodity central to the economy of empire and directly linked to the swift

ocean current of the title, which enabled its trade, and the devastating history of transatlantic slavery. Homer interweaves these complicated narratives in a painting that confronts human struggle, personified by a stoic survivor, against the relentless power of nature.

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IN CASE, SIDE CLOSEST TO GALLERY ENTRANCE

Reproduction of *The Gulf Stream*, as first exhibited in Philadelphia in 1900

Catalogue of the 69th Annual Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, January 15–February 24, 1900

This reproduction reveals how *The Gulf Stream* appeared at its first exhibition in 1900. Even before the show closed, Homer wrote, “I ordered that painting ‘Gulf Stream’ sent to Boston . . . as I now wish to paint on it some more.” Between 1900 and 1906, he made many changes, including adding a boat as a possible source of rescue on the horizon. Viewers disturbed by the catastrophic scene had pressed for details as to its outcome. Homer explained, albeit sardonically, that the man would be “returned to his friends and home, & ever after live happily.”

IN CASE, SIDE FARTHER FROM GALLERY ENTRANCE

Distressed Boat (Sketch for *The Gulf Stream*)

1885

Graphite on paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Morris K. Jesup Fund, 2016 (2016.1, recto)

Homer may have recorded this scene of a boat in distress as he was sailing between the Bahamas and Cuba in early 1885. Rapidly drawn in a sketchbook (from which it has been removed), it seems to record his initial impression of the disaster that inspired the painting *The Gulf Stream* fifteen years later. Here, a dismasted boat with one or two figures on deck is tossed on rough seas as it heads into an ominous storm. Homer would also incorporate elements of this composition into the watercolor *Sharks* (on view nearby).

ON NEARBY WALL, RIGHT TO LEFT

After the Hurricane, Bahamas

1899

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection

This is among Homer's most astonishing and ambitious watercolors for its sheer technical virtuosity and epic subject matter—and also one of his most grim. He constructed the scene based on his observations of men at work on the sea and his study of tropical storms in the Bahamas (although neither of his two visits to the islands took place during hurricane season). In the aftermath of a storm, a current has carried an unfortunate sailor and his wrecked boat to shore. In this contest between humans and nature, we are left to guess at the man's fate: is he unconscious, resting, dead? The watercolor might also be interpreted as a possible outcome of the dire situation depicted in *The Gulf Stream*.

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Hurricane, Bahamas

1898

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1910 (10.228.7)

Homer's attention to inclement weather in this watercolor distinguishes it from the more idyllic tropical images he produced during a previous trip to the Bahamas, in 1884–85. Dark clouds threaten, while several tall palms are lashed by violent winds. As was his tendency, the artist acknowledged the archipelago's status as a Crown colony—signaled here at bottom center with the Red Ensign, a flag flown by British ships. This detail combined with the tempestuous weather may evoke the geopolitical turmoil elsewhere in the Caribbean that year, specifically in Cuba and Puerto Rico. The weather events depicted here and in Homer's images of storms off the coast of Maine represent important precursors to the turbulence of *The Gulf Stream*.

Shore and Surf, Nassau

1899

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1910 (10.228.5)

On Homer's second trip to the Bahamas, in the winter of 1898–99, he demonstrated a growing interest in tropical weather, notably storms and hurricanes. As in *Palm Tree, Nassau* (on view nearby), the artist here envisions a tempest building on the horizon of a richly textured seascape, accentuating the bright passage of foam-flecked azure surf with darker zones of shore and sky. A red pennant is visible at far left, behind a white coral lighthouse. This specialty hurricane flag replaced the Union Jack in times of inclement weather, alerting passing ships of rough seas. Through this subtle detail, Homer draws attention to the distant steamer's vulnerability in open water.

Palm Tree, Nassau

1898

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1910 (10.228.6)

This watercolor, composed vertically to accentuate the towering height of the central palm, visualizes the approach of circular storm clouds. Wind whirls around the tree, whose branches bend to the right. Conversely, the red flag in the background—raised by the lighthouse keeper to signal a coming hurricane or squall—blows in the opposite direction. By picturing these contrary winds, Homer contemplates the types of complex meteorological effects he would later thematize in *The Gulf Stream*.

Winter Coast

1890

Oil on canvas

Philadelphia Museum of Art, John G. Johnson Collection, 1917

This painting is an atypical representation of Prouts Neck for Homer, in both its seasonal focus and its vertical composition. At left-center, a diminutive, solitary hunter—dead goose over his shoulder and gun in hand—contemplates the titanic force of the sea and storm along the frozen Maine coast. With the flick of his brush and a stark palette of earthen tones, the artist conveys in bravura fashion the elemental relationship between humankind and “wild nature” that remained his primary subject throughout the 1890s. One critic described it as a “most bleak, cold, ‘shivery’ place . . . a rigorous condition of affairs.”

Maine Coast

1896

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of George A. Hearn, in memory of Arthur Hoppock Hearn, 1911 (11.116.1)

In 1895, on the eve of his fifty-ninth birthday, Homer wrote to his brother Charles: “The life that I have chosen gives me my full hours of enjoyment for the balance of my life. The sun will not rise, or set, without my notice, and thanks.” During his final decades, the artist honed the essential themes of his art, steadily and insistently focusing on nature and mortality. His powers of observation were bound to his sense of impermanence. At Prouts Neck, he channeled his commitment to realism into representations of the rugged coast and churning ocean across the seasons, in varying conditions and at different times of day. In Homer’s depictions of fierce weather in particular, the expressive quality of his brushwork conveys the eternity and majesty of the ocean.

Cannon Rock

1895

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of George A. Hearn, 1906 (06.1281)

Prouts Neck, Maine, where Homer spent most of his last twenty-five years, hosted a vibrant summer community that dispersed during the winter months. The artist enjoyed the tranquility of the off-season, when the storms were fiercer and the ocean more changeable and dramatic. Cannon Rock, seen protruding from the outcropping at lower right, takes its name from its resemblance to a cannon seen from behind and from the booming sound of the surf breaking at its base, particularly during stormy weather.

In 1903, a critic for the *New York Times* admired *Cannon Rock* for the “infinite zest” and “virility” of Homer’s brushwork—especially evident in the thick impasto of the cresting wave—and declared him “the greatest living marine painter of the age.”

ON OPPOSITE WALL

Northeaster

1895; reworked by 1901

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of George A. Hearn, 1910 (10.64.5)

Later in life, Homer increasingly edited his paintings, clarifying his compositions and their meanings. In 1895, when he first exhibited this epic scene of a winter storm at Prouts Neck, it included two figures crouching on the rocks in the lower left corner. Between 1896 and 1900, the artist eliminated the human presence and intensified the spray from the crashing waves. When the refined painting was exhibited at the Union League Club in New York in 1901, the critic for the *New-York Tribune* appreciated the new emphasis on pure nature and admired the painting as a representation of “three fundamental facts, the rugged strength of the rocks, the weighty, majestic movement of the sea and the large atmosphere of great natural spaces unmarked by the presence of puny man.”

ON OPPOSITE WALL, RIGHT TO LEFT

LATE SEASCAPES

After nearly a decade of living year-round in Prouts Neck, Maine, Homer recommitted himself to oil painting in the 1890s, making his studio view of coastal rocks and pounding surf his primary subject. Intent on capturing the changing mood and motion of the ocean in increasingly bold brushwork and keen detail, the artist foregrounded his subjective responses to the forces of nature and its profound mysteries. One critic marveled that Homer presented the “waves of the sea, as never before so studied, observed, suggested, and characterized.”

While canvases such as *Winter Coast* (1890) feature a negligible human presence, others like *Northeaster* (1895, reworked by 1901) were revised by the artist to focus exclusively on the physical environment, devoid of humanity. In these sensory and sublime seascapes, as well as a series of evocative moonlit images that suggest more symbolic meanings, Homer seems to reckon with the transcendent.

Study for *Searchlight, Harbor Entrance, Santiago de Cuba*

1885

Graphite and chalk on paper

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, New York, Gift of Charles Savage Homer, Jr.

Morro Castle

1885

Watercolor on paper

West Point Museum, U.S. Army Museum Enterprise

Homer sketched these drawings of Morro Castle on-site while exploring Santiago de Cuba in February 1885. Built by the Spanish in the seventeenth century, the fortress captivated travelers from the United States, who marveled at its impressive size and age. In *Morro Castle*, a year from the century of the building's construction appears to have been inscribed across the sentry box at right. This indiscernible date, along with the weathered walls and archaic mortar cannon, perhaps alludes to Spain's increasingly precarious position in Cuba in the face of encroaching U.S. interests. Originally a defense against pirates, Morro

was later used by the Spanish colonial government as a prison for Cuban insurrectionists, several of whom were executed there around the time of Homer's visit. This context lends his compositions a possible political dimension. Rather than picture the stronghold on its formidable perch above sea level, the artist instead provides views from within, near where the killings took place.

Searchlight on Harbor Entrance, Santiago de Cuba

1902

Oil on canvas

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of George A. Hearn, 1906 (06.1282)

Homer revisited his 1885 drawings of Morro Castle following the 1898 Spanish-Cuban-American War. In the resulting canvas, he focused on an electric searchlight used by the U.S. Navy to prevent the Spanish fleet from escaping Santiago harbor until they could be defeated. The artist offers a striking juxtaposition between the dim, antiquated cannons of the Spanish monument and the searchlight's powerful rays. Framing the conflict in symbolic, disembodied terms, Homer perhaps implied a sense of U.S. technological superiority and imperial ascendancy. Meanwhile, only a small section of Cuban shoreline is illuminated at right, reflecting the ways the colonial power struggle eclipsed what had been a long, local fight for independence. Homer's modern history

painting appears to brood on these unequal power dynamics without offering a clear resolution.

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Cape Trinity, Saguenay River, Moonlight

1904

Oil on canvas

Myron Kunin Collection of American Art, Minneapolis

Among the most allusive and foreboding of Homer's late paintings, this moonlit scene was completed a few years before his death. Its brooding, starkly monochromatic composition reveals a symbolist approach to an actual landscape: a dramatic outcropping of rocks in three plateaus (*cap Trinité*) on the Saguenay River, north of Quebec City. One critic remarked on the picture's "remote and even fantastic effect . . . whether intended or not." Inspired by memories of Canadian fishing trips Homer had been taking with his brother Charles since 1893, the somber subject, visualized as a near-abstraction, carries striking psychological weight as an end-of-life expression.

Kissing the Moon

1904

Oil on canvas

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., Bequest of Candace C. Stimson (1946.19)

Kissing the Moon is among Homer's most distinctive works, painted near the end of his life. Its puzzling composition of a hunter and sailors—fixed in a liminal moment and nearly submerged by waves—exemplifies the artist's ongoing investigation of themes of incipient conflict and ambiguous outcomes. The painting has been interpreted in biographical terms, possibly referencing the mortality of the three Homer brothers. The artist resisted any explanation of the work, noting only that he preferred that viewers keep their distance from it. He wrote to his dealer in 1904, "Your window is the only place where a picture can be seen in a proper manner . . . to look at and not smell of."

Early Morning after a Storm at Sea

1900–1903

Oil on canvas

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of J. H. Wade

At Prouts Neck, Homer observed the sea constantly, explaining to a friend: “You must not paint everything you see. You must wait, and wait patiently until the exceptional, the wonderful effect or aspect comes. Then, if you have sense enough to see it—well . . . that is all there is to that.” The artist began this evocative seascape in 1900 but based it on a watercolor he had painted in 1883. He considered this oil “the best picture of the sea that I have painted” and was dismayed when it was poorly received by critics. Always sensitive to the reception of his work, Homer complained that “no one understood it,” and “besides that, the people never see the early morning effect. They don’t get up early enough.”

[Audio Guide 665](#)

On a Lee Shore

1900

Oil on canvas

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence,
Jesse Metcalf Fund

On a Lee Shore is one of only three oils completed by the artist in 1900, suggesting his final thoughts on dramatic seascapes. Homer himself called it “a very excellent painting.” It pictures a schooner sailing in rough weather past the Prouts Neck rocks along the “lee shore”—that is, where the wind is fiercely blowing. Unusual in its square format, the powerfully realistic scene reveals how the artist’s acute interest in the fundamental drama of dangerous conflict between humans and nature intensified as he aged. The heightened naturalism of the work coupled with its tumultuous subject gave the eventual owner of the painting “the feeling that he might be washed out of his home at any moment.”

Driftwood

1909

Oil on canvas

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Henry H. and Zoe Oliver Sherman Fund and other funds

Homer's final contemplation on the grandeur and perils of the sea, *Driftwood* is likely the last oil painting that he completed before his death. A lone protagonist, dressed in foul-weather gear, attempts to collect a large piece of driftwood that has been carried across the vast and turbulent ocean to the rocky shore at Prouts Neck. Underscoring Homer's interest in ocean currents, the image also summarizes the way the sea connected various themes across his career. The man's task seems futile. Seen from behind, he is a surrogate not only for the artist facing death, but also for the many sailors he depicted confronting the enduring power of nature over the years. Homer died quietly in his Prouts Neck studio in September 1910, at the age of seventy-four.

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Hound and Hunter

1892

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of Stephen C. Clark (1947.11.1)

After the first exhibition of this graphic scene, Homer felt compelled to explain that the hunter was not drowning the deer. Though he resented having to defend his paintings, he nevertheless clarified: “The critics may think that thar deer is alive but he is not, otherwise the boat & man would be knocked high & dry. I can shut the deer’s eyes, & put pennies on them if that will make it better understood.” Homer’s explanation did little to assuage potential patrons’ discomfort with the pictured struggle between human and animal. He kept this compelling canvas, which considers the relationship between predator and prey, hanging prominently in his studio for many years, until it was sold to a private collector.

Right and Left

1909

Oil on canvas

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of the Avalon Foundation (1951.8.1)

Right and Left is widely regarded as one of the most powerful and innovative paintings in the history of American art. Homer's second-to-last oil painting, the work has been interpreted as a virtuosic depiction of expert duck-hunting, a scene of potent conflict between man and nature, and a meditation on the artist's own mortality. By capturing a life-and-death moment for the depicted goldeneye ducks—puffs of smoke and a flash of light from a shotgun signal the damage caused by the minuscule sportsman in the canoe at left—Homer ruminates on unnatural endings, much as he had decades earlier in *Sharpshooter* (on view in the first gallery). Compositionally complex and emotionally piercing, this late work reveals the artist's ability to distill universal themes in surprising formal language.

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MORTALITY

The artistic themes of conflict and struggle that run throughout Homer's career culminated in a series of works produced during his final decade. In dramatic scenes of hazardous family adventures in Quebec and more placid images of fishing and hunting in the Adirondacks, the artist confronted life and death in nature. Some compositions offer disquieting if traditional narratives of predator and prey. In others—such as *Fox Hunt* (1893) and *Right and Left* (1909)—Homer surprises with innovative depictions of Darwinian natural selection or environmental destruction that go beyond convention in their ambiguity of meaning. These images have been interpreted as autobiographical statements on mortality, painted by an artist who had directly confronted conflict and its consequences during his productive life.

Shooting the Rapids, Saguenay River

1905–10

Oil on canvas with chalk

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Charles S. Homer, 1911 (11.57)

Homer family tradition recalls that this painting—left unfinished in the artist’s studio after his death in 1910—was inspired by a particularly perilous excursion down the rapids of the Saguenay River in remote Quebec. The frightened passenger, seen gripping the sides of the canoe, is Homer’s older brother, Charles, who was his frequent companion on fishing trips. Of the many images of men in boats painted across his career, it seems fitting that the last one remains in a liminal state, preserving the sense of imminent danger and unknown outcomes in a fraught encounter with nature. Homer’s family considered the painting complete in its essential details and donated it to The Met in 1911.

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Guides Carrying a Canoe

1902

Watercolor on paper

Private collection

This watercolor dates from Homer's last fishing trip to the rugged and remote landscape around Canada's Saguenay River, which the artist had been visiting with his brother Charles for nearly ten years. Seemingly more peaceful in its focus than Homer's other Quebec watercolors, the quiet scene depicts two guides transporting an empty canoe in the foreground—the one at right fragmented and nearly subsumed by the landscape—alongside three sketchily defined figures in a canoe near the shore.

Homer had long admired the nature guides and made them the subjects of paintings throughout his career. Late in his life, they became more critical as they allowed the aging artist and his brother to continue making their excursions.

ON FREESTANDING WALL TO RIGHT

Fox Hunt

1893

Oil on canvas

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Joseph E. Temple Fund

Fox Hunt is widely viewed as Homer's most haunting late "naturalist" painting. Rendered in a manner that suggests a close study of Japanese woodblock prints, it dramatically embodies the recurrent theme of conflict in nature. The subject is novel for the artist, though he had been depicting scenes of hunting and fishing for years. Here, Homer has removed any trace of human presence and focused on the Darwinian struggle of natural selection in the animal kingdom: during a bleak Maine winter, an ominous flock of hungry crows become predators and a fox, desperately moving through heavy snow drifts, the prey. That the artist appears to have painted the scene from the hunted creature's perspective, identifying with its plight, only heightens the tension.

ON WALL TO RIGHT, RIGHT TO LEFT

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

—Winslow Homer

LEGACY

Homer believed that his watercolors were essential to his artistic legacy. In his writings, the artist acknowledged their critical role in the establishment of his reputation and in his ability to earn a living. Following Homer’s death in 1910, Kenyon Cox reflected on his fellow artist’s mastery of the medium, asserting that “in the end he painted better in watercolors . . . than almost any modern has been able to do.” Homer’s watercolors are celebrated for their technical brilliance, fluid immediacy, and striking, saturated tones. In them, the artist explored on a more intimate scale the powerful themes that preoccupied him across his career: epic scenes of distress on the ocean, conflict between humans and nature, and the transience of life.

Woods at Prout's Neck

1887

Watercolor on paper

Private collection, New York

Perhaps imagined, this scene brilliantly conveys the charged tension and ambiguity that define so much of Homer's imagery. In his depiction of two women clad in what looks like elegant mourning dress and mysteriously nestled in a burst of Maine autumn foliage, the artist showcases his ability to enliven paper surfaces with a range of startling, saturated hues of pigment. The watercolor dates to a period when Homer wrote to his brother Charles, "I am very busy painting in watercolor which means something that I can sell for what people will give," adding, "I have money in plenty."

[**Audio Guide 669**](#)

An October Day

1889

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., Acquired by Sterling and Francine Clark, 1947

Homer's many images of hunting highlight the harsh realities of the sport and foreground the moments between life and death. Here, a colorful autumn landscape provides a stunning setting for the brutal practice of hounding deer. Chased into the water by the dog visible on the right horizon, the buck will likely be captured and killed by the hunter in the nearby boat at left. As the prey attempts to outswim his predator, he disrupts the placid surface of the lake. Homer presents this moment of imminent demise from an ambiguous point above the water as the deer gazes in our direction.

After the Hunt

1892

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on wove paper

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Paul Rodman Mabury
Collection

Homer often painted watercolors in series, rendering different moments of the same activity. *After the Hunt* can be read in sequence with *An October Day*, hanging nearby. Both works show aspects of the controversial practice of hounding deer. This composition focuses on the hunter at center—depicted as a heroic figure in nature—after he has retrieved his prey from the water. As in many of Homer’s hunting watercolors, there is a tension between the beautiful scenery, rendered with dazzling technique, and the brutality of the subject. At first glance, rich autumnal tones and glowing pools of colors make it easy to overlook the deer carcass in the boat at left, its pale fur blending with the tones of the men’s attire.

Hudson River

1892

Watercolor and graphite on paper

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William Sturgis Bigelow Collection

In *Hudson River*, a lone figure peers from behind a pile of felled and limbed trees that have presumably been harvested by loggers. The objects of his gaze, two deer, are visible on the distant shore. They bound away, raising their tails to expose the snow-white fur beneath in a gesture known as “flagging” that signals their awareness of the man’s presence and potential threat. Through this deft combination of details, Homer offers a visual meditation on both the individual and industrial scale of human incursions across the Adirondacks.

A Good Pool, Saguenay River

1895

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass., Acquired by Sterling Clark, 1917

This innovative watercolor dramatically foregrounds the prized ouananiche, a silver-gray landlocked salmon prevalent around Lake Saint John, Canada. Homer depicts the game fish airborne, pursued by three precariously positioned men—including French-Canadian and Indigenous (Innu/Montagnais) guides—in a vigorous if uncertain struggle. An 1898 New York display of this and other watercolors entranced viewers, with critics commending their authenticity and artistry: “Mr. Homer’s watercolors are permeated with outdoor feeling and with the atmosphere of the region, whose delights he has doubtless himself tasted.”

[**Audio Guide 670**](#)

OPPOSITE WALL

Diamond Shoal

1905

Watercolor and graphite on paper

Private collection

Homer's last known watercolor is a dynamic exploration of one of his most enduring subjects—the perils and power of the sea. It depicts a boat near the Diamond Shoal lightship, a vessel equipped with beacons to aid navigation in dangerous waters off the coast of North Carolina, at the junction of the Gulf Stream and the Labrador Current. Feared by sailors as the “graveyard of the Atlantic,” it was an apt subject for Homer given his fascination with oceanic danger; he was likely familiar with the area owing to his winter trips from Maine to Florida. Urgently confronting the treacherous gale, the sailboat seems to head straight for the artist-viewer, creating a suspenseful scene of conflict that merges a dramatic narrative with breathtaking artistry.

ON WALL TO RIGHT, LEFT TO RIGHT

Burnt Mountain

1892

Watercolor and graphite on wove paper

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd

A hunter and his guide—perhaps the same subjects who appear in *Bear Hunting*, *Prospect Rock*, hanging nearby—pause for a moment of repose atop a granite ledge. Here, Homer isolates a section of the Adirondacks not far from his cabin at the North Woods Club, a private preserve near Minerva, New York. Known as Burnt Mountain, this particular slope gained its name from a forest fire that had raged in the area decades earlier. The skeletal roots of fallen trees appear silhouetted against an overcast sky. These dynamic compositional elements, coupled with the work's title, belie the scene's seeming tranquility, at once echoing and anticipating the turbulence of the rugged environment.

Bear Hunting, Prospect Rock

1892

Watercolor and graphite on paper

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of John Gellatly

Bear Hunting, Prospect Rock reveals Homer's abiding interest in the guides, trappers, and other woodsmen of the Adirondacks. These mountains, among the largest and wildest in the eastern United States, emerged as a popular destination after the Civil War. Between 1889 and 1910, the artist visited the region at least twenty times, often accompanied by his brother Charles, creating more than one hundred paintings. In this work, Homer focuses on two hunters who cautiously—perhaps expectantly—peer across a stretch of exposed rock. The armed man in front has his finger on the gun's trigger, indicating his readiness to shoot in what is otherwise an uncertain encounter.

AT EXHIBITION EXIT

Please visit Gallery 767 in the American Wing for select contemporary artists' responses to Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream*.

image caption:

Kerry James Marshall, *Study for Gulf Stream*, 2003. Graphite, watercolor, glitter on paper. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Butler Family Fund, 2005. © Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

image description:

Three figures sail on a small boat; a pelican sits on a dock post in the left foreground. A brown border of fishing rope, nets, and sea shells wrap around the drawing's edge.