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Winslow Homer Exhibition Stops in Fort Wayne on National Tour

Groundbreaking research gives new insight into Homer’s American inspirations

FORT WAYNE, IN - An exhibition of 240 celebrated works by American artist Winslow Homer opens July 28 at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art and will be on view through September 23. Winslow Homer is arguably the most popular and important artist and illustrator of 19th century America. The exhibition *Winslow Homer: From Poetry to Fiction, The Engraved Works* has been in planning for more than 20 years beginning in 1995, when curator Reilly Rhodes, then director of the National Art Museum of Sport, took notice of the immense range of Homer material that was available to museums and collectors in the rare book and print shops of New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco.

“The opportunity for museums to showcase these works on paper offers enormous storytelling potential that people of all ages can appreciate and enjoy,” said Rhodes. “Homer is easy to connect with and to understand. The content is straightforward and masterfully expressed. There was never any doubt, even in his youth, that Homer was a highly gifted and talented artist among his peers.”

However, there is more to gain from seeing this beautifully displayed exhibition in the galleries at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art. History comes alive in a way that not only informs, but entertains with brief, yet detailed descriptions of what the artist wanted to convey to the public. Nothing in this exhibition is overlooked when it comes to appreciating and understanding the past—its history, customs and struggles. Homer’s lively focus on urban and rural day-to-day activities, his optimism for the future of the nation and America’s energized youth, and his thought-provoking depictions of wartime conflict are skillfully presented through his engravings.

The initiative for Rhodes to assemble such a large collection of Homer’s engravings follows three previous exhibitions that he organized, one at the National Art Museum of Sport, a second at the Monterey Museum of Art and a third at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art. The importance of these works of art was originally brought to the attention of Rhodes through the advice and recommendation of D. Dodge Thompson, Chief of Exhibitions at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. At the time, Thompson was advising the National Art Museum of Sport on acquisition possibilities for building a permanent collection of sporting art.

The exhibition *Winslow Homer: From Poetry to Fiction, The Engraved Works* provides a rare opportunity to view an extensive collection of engravings by Homer when he was between the ages of 19 and 39. The works are dated 1855 to 1875, and span over one-third of the artist’s creative career. Several never before exhibited period photographs and handwritten documents
from the period have been added that were not included in the inaugural exhibition at The Butler Institute of American Art in 2017. The source for many of these photographs came from descendants of farm families in the Hudson River Valley where Homer painted and made sketches for wood engravings for the pictorial press, including *Harper’s Weekly* and *Every Saturday*.

Homer owned two cameras in his lifetime and was known to have made drawings from photographs for his monochromatic images and oil paintings early in his career. Photography was in its infancy for most of the nineteenth century, unable, in most cases, to provide sharp, clear images of movement without blurred, out of focus results. Not until the development of faster shutter speeds could photography produce successful still images of movement. Homer was able to create scenes and actions that suggests movement and liveliness in his compositions.

The exhibition is organized into twelve thematic areas that cover subject matter that most appealed to the artist. These themes include poetry and literature, scenes of rural America, leisure time pursuits, holidays, seaside views, the sporting life, courtship and romance, America’s youth, the changing role of women, and activities of soldiers behind the scenes during the Civil War.

The most astonishing development resulting from the detailed study for ‘telling the story’ of Winslow Homer’s art is in the discovery of the location where Homer made his iconic oil painting *Snap the Whip*, in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York, about 90 miles north of New York City. Rhodes documents the search that eventually pointed to the early Dutch community of Hurley, New York. “To my great surprise, not only did the research produce the location of the schoolhouse and playground that Homer depicted in his 1872 painting, but the school building is still there, though now modified and converted to a private home.” Photos of the schoolhouse are included in the exhibition, as well as other details that trace the activity of Homer over a period of seven years while he sketched and painted in the pastoral countryside of Hurley and Ulster County, New York, before his last visit in 1877.

*Winslow Homer: From Poetry to Fiction—The Engraved Works* was organized by Contemporary and Modern Print Exhibitions. The exhibition will tour to museums nationwide through 2022.

**About the Fort Wayne Museum of Art:** Beginning with art classes in 1888, the Fort Wayne Museum of Art has evolved into the leading visual arts institution in Northeast Indiana. Regularly exhibiting nationally acclaimed artists, the FWMoA also boasts a permanent collection including works by Mark di Suvero, Andy Warhol, and Kara Walker. The FWMoA is committed to the collection, preservation, and presentation of American and related art to engage and educate broad and diverse audiences throughout the community and region, and add value to their lives. The Fort Wayne Museum of Art is funded in part by Arts United of Greater Fort Wayne. This activity made possible, in part, with support from the Indiana Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

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1. *Snap-the-Whip*, wood engraving published by *Harper’s Weekly*, September 20, 1873. *Snap-the-Whip* was Homer’s grand achievement and most popular work of art, both in painting and printmaking. The game of Crack the whip seen here is being played by nine country school boys, while in the background, seen at the far left two girls engage in a game of *Hoops and Sticks* which is a seventeenth century Dutch game brought to America during the colonial settlement in the 1660s.
2. *One-room Schoolhouse*, Hurley Mountain Road
Photograph by Michael Nelson, September 2015
3. *Country School Boys*, Tintype photo, c. 1875
   The six boys seen in the friezelike composition are nearly identical in age and appearance to the boys engaged in Homer’s spirited playground of Crack the Whip.
4. **Hoops and Sticks**, tintype, c. 1875

In the nineteenth century, the game of Hoops and Sticks was played along a pathway or in an open field such as a school playground and was a popular recess activity for young girls. Prior to the end of the century, girls were considered to be lacking in both strength and technique in most sporting or game activities with the exception of croquet, horseback riding and less strenuous activities.
5. **Cutting a Figure**, wood engraving
Published in Every Saturday, February 4, 1871
Homer’s composition of a young woman standing alone on the ice, in the center of the page, is symbolic of the independence of young women in the post-civil war years, as she demonstrates her command of skating—one of New England’s favorite wintertime sports.