**Winslow Homer: From Poetry to Fiction - the Engraved Works**

**July 28-September 23, 2018**

This exhibition is one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of Winslow Homer wood engravings ever to tour American museums, including many never before exhibited or published rare period photographs that relate to Homer’s engravings from the early 1860s to the late 1870s.

How to use this resource: This packet is designed to be flexible. Use it to help prepare for a docent-led tour of the museum, to inform a self-guided tour, or to discuss selected artworks in your classroom, whether you’re able to physically visit the museum or not. The suggested activities (page 7) should be used in conjunction with in-depth discussion of at least one related artwork.

**About Winslow Homer (1836-1910):**

Winslow Homer is regarded by many as one of the greatest American painters of the 19th century. Homer was born in Boston and raised in rural Massachusetts. He was close with his mother, a gifted amateur watercolorist and his first teacher. His father was a businessman who apprenticed young Winslow to a commercial lithographer after his high school graduation. The lithographer, J.H. Buford, would be Homer’s only “master,” as he turned down a full-time position at Harper’s Weekly to become a freelance illustrator, his profession for nearly 20 years. The engravings featured in this exhibition are from this era—illustrations of daily life in urban and rural New England that were published in popular magazines such as Harper’s and Ballou’s Pictorial.

Homer received little formal training as a painter but quickly built his skills independently. His mother wanted him to go to Europe for further training, but the Civil War had broken out, and Harper’s instead sent him to the frontline. He created sketches of military as well as civilian life during wartime, which he then returned to his studio to paint. By 1875, he was able to earn a living by selling his watercolors and stopped producing engraved illustrations.

*From Poetry to Fiction* includes Homer’s engravings from 1860-75, although his career spanned until his death in 1910. His well-known maritime paintings were made during this later period, heavily influenced by the time he spent in the fishing village of Cullercoats in northern England. His later oils and watercolors depict scenes near his home in Prouts Neck, Maine, as well as Key West, Cuba, and the Bahamas.

**Historical Context:**

Most of the engravings in the exhibition (and all of the selected images in this resource) were created for distribution in publications such as Harper’s Weekly, Ballou’s Pictorial, and others, from the years 1860-1875. Harper’s was the most widely read journal in the country through the Civil War years, and Homer’s illustrations were very popular. Thomas Nast, considered the father of American political cartooning, was also a regular contributor (find a work by Nast in the exhibition!).

The Civil War (1861-65) was the first war with widespread illustrated coverage, thanks to publications like these. Homer was one of around 30 artist-reporters who covered the war through roughly 6,000 total images for New York’s three illustrated weekly newspapers. The technology required to widely reproduce engravings had only become common in the 1850s. Although photography had made significant strides, it was still difficult to develop in the field and to reproduce photographic images. The technology of the time required exposure times of at least 5 seconds, so photographers like Matthew Brady and his team photographed portraits, equipment, and the locations and aftermath of battles. Sometimes, photos were reproduced for print by engraving (see next page), and there is some evidence that Homer used photographs to inform his own work as well.
Medium and Technique

The illustrations in From Poetry to Fiction are wood engravings. What is a wood engraving?!

An engraving is a type of print in which fine lines are carved into a block (or matrix). Engravings can be intaglio, where the design is carved into metal, but in Homer’s case, the matrix was an end-cut of hardwood. Wood engravings are a type of relief printing, meaning the area around the image is carved away, then ink is applied to the raised surface, which is then transferred to paper like a stamp. Wood engravings are different from woodcuts because they use the end cut of the wood, which is harder than the front, grainy surface, and allows for more detail and fine lines. The tools used are also different.

Homer would create his drawings on paper, then transfer them in great detail to the wood block or, often, many wood blocks bolted together. These small wood blocks would go to professional engravers to be carved, then re-assembled and checked to make sure that they captured the original artist’s drawing and style faithfully. Ink was then rolled onto the surface and pressed onto a piece of paper. Look for a faint grid pattern where the lines stop in some of the illustrations. These are the prints that were made from multiple blocks.

Portraying Space

- Perspective is a system for creating the illusion of depth (3 dimensions) on a flat, 2-dimensional surface. There are two main types of perspective.

Linear (left): the relative size and position of objects are determined by drawn or imagined lines converging at a point on the horizon (the vanishing point). Notice the lines on the ceiling and floor, and smaller figures in the distance.

Atmospheric (or aerial, right): as objects get further away, they have less detail and contrast. Colors also become more blue. Notice the softer gray tones in the distance of Snap the Whip.

Homer’s use of perspective helps separate background from foreground, so the subject stands out more. Sometimes, perspective is exaggerated as in Homeward Bound. How does this affect the picture?
Selected Images/Tour Script

A selection of these works will be discussed during a docent-led school tour. A PowerPoint presentation featuring larger versions of the images for classroom use may be found at fwmoa.org/PreK-12/

All works are wood engravings by Winslow Homer.

Themes: American history, movement, perspective, value, illustration and narrative art

Essential questions: (choose 2-3) How do objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented, cultivate appreciation and understanding? How does learning about art impact how we perceive the world? How can the viewer “read” a work of art as a text? How does knowing and using visual art vocabularies help us understand and interpret works of art? How does art help us understand the lives of people of different times, places and cultures? How does the intended audience of an artwork impact the work itself? (Standards VA:Pr6.1, Re8.1, Cn11.1)

Ideas to consider and look for throughout the exhibit

- Why is it so dark in here?! Students may notice (or you may wish to point out) that the lighting used in the exhibition is a bit dim. This is to protect these delicate works on paper, which fade faster when exposed to light. This is also why we ask that visitors turn their flash off when taking photographs in the museum. (VA:Pr4.1, Pr6.1)

- Signatures: On many of the prints you can find Winslow Homer’s signature in some form (usually initials). Some prints also have another signature in addition to or instead of Homer’s—this belongs to the lead engraver who carved the block.

- Some of these prints are engraved versions of Homer’s more famous paintings (Snap the Whip, The Veteran in a New Field, The Noon Recess, and others). Why do you think these became so well-known?

- All of these works were from Homer’s time as a freelance illustrator for magazines, which was his career for about 20 years before he became a full-time painter.

- What’s in a name? Examine titles of these prints. How do artists title their work? Would the title be different for a journal illustration versus a painting?

- Homeward Bound, 1867
  Spend a few seconds just looking at this image. What is your first/overall impression of it? How does it make you feel?
  Is anything in this picture not moving? How is movement shown? Imagine what the picture would be like if Homer chose to align it with the slant of the deck.
  Perspective: Why do the figures to the back left look so small? Because they’re far away—this is due to perspective. Follow the lines of the floorboards. They all go towards a vanishing point. Does the perspective seem totally accurate here?
  Background: Homer visited France for ten months, returning in the fall of 1867 when this image was made.

- The Veteran in a New Field, 1867
  Spend some time looking BEFORE reading the title. What is going on in the image? What do you think Homer wanted us to understand from this picture?
  NOW read the title. This was created shortly after the Civil War (we’ll see images from that time in the next room). What does that add to our understanding of this print? Can the title have multiple meanings?
  Is there a mood or emotion here? How did Homer create that feeling?
  Why do you think the man is shown with his back to the viewer?
  Homer painted this scene in 1865, and later created this print. How would the picture change if it was in color?
Snap the Whip, 1873, and lightbox reproductions of both versions of the painting

Look at all three versions of this picture. What is the same? What is different? Which version do you prefer? Why do you think the composition was changed? Should artists try to portray scenes exactly as they see them? Which objects in the picture are in the foreground, middle ground, and background? How does Homer create depth in the picture?

- **Perspective:** Look for both atmospheric and linear

Our National Winter Exercise — Skating, 1866

How does the artist create a sense of movement? Note the diagonal lines created by the skaters’ bodies, ribbons, etc. These kinds of lines make the picture look exciting and dynamic.

How does your eye move across the page? Are there elements and lines in the picture that lead your eye a certain way?

How would this scene look different today? (Just the clothing?)

The War for the Union 1862—A Cavalry Charge

How would you describe this scene overall?

During Homer’s time, cameras could not capture this kind of action (they were too slow and heavy). Do you think it looked exactly like this? What might Homer have changed for artistic purposes? What do you think is true to life?

How would you feel seeing this picture in the newspaper?

Most Civil War-related artwork did not depict battle scenes. Why do you think that might have been?

Inauguration of Abraham Lincoln as President, 1861

Homer was assigned to cover the inauguration for Harper’s.

How would you describe this scene? What can we learn about Lincoln’s inauguration by viewing this image?

Homer probably used a photograph of the scene to help him with his drawing (a new technology at the time!)
Thanksgiving Day in the Army—After Dinner: The Wishbone, 1864

What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? Do you have the same tradition?

What impact do you think this image would have had on people back home?

Christmas Boxes in Camp, 1861

What is the mood in this picture? How does the artist make it feel that way?

Choose a character in the image and imagine what they’re thinking and feeling. Keep in mind the situation of these soldiers—where did these gifts come from? (They were probably away from their families for a long time so receiving gifts from them would be especially exciting!)

The Battle of Bunker Hill – Watching the Fight from Copp’s Hill, in Boston, wood engraving, 1875

The last illustration Homer made for Harper’s
Notice the clothing—is it different from that in the other pictures? Do you think the scene shown is earlier or later than the others?
How would you describe the facial expressions?
Look at foreground, middle ground and background—what is happening in each part of the picture? What do you think everyone is watching?
This was created 100 years after the Battle of Bunker Hill during the American Revolution, and soon after the end of the Civil War. Harper’s was published in NYC, but Homer was from Boston and was familiar with the area around Copp’s Hill, although it looked much different
Why do you think Homer chose to depict people watching the battle rather than the battle itself?

Fireworks on the Night of the Fourth of July, 1868

Homer focuses on the people watching the display, not the fireworks themselves

Find someone in the picture who is not watching the fireworks. What happened to him? Do the people around him notice? How would you describe the expressions on the faces?
Art Students and Copyists in the Louvre Gallery, Paris, 1868

What is going on in this picture? What do you notice about the artists? (Many are women! They’re studying a painting that was not considered to be very “feminine” but times were changing)

Why do artists copy other artists’ work?

What is the lady in the black dress doing? Do you ever step back to look at your paintings or drawings?

What is Homer’s focus in this picture? The artwork? Setting? Or the people? All the other artists in the picture are studying the work of old masters, but Homer was studying the people there. This illustration went with a Harper’s article about the Louvre, its history, and its long role in inspiring artists. Two of Homer’s Civil War paintings were on display in Paris, likely his motivation for visiting.

Vocab recall: notice the lines on the floor and ceiling and the smaller figures in the distance…what is this system called? (Perspective)

The Bathe at Newport, 1858 and Seesaw – Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1874

Compare and contrast these two images. What’s different/the same?

Which is better? Which do you prefer? Why?

Notice the dates when these were created (read the labels!). Did Homer’s skills improve over time? How?

At Sea – Signaling a Passing Steamer, 1871

Homer’s artistic focus slowly shifted away from people and towards the power of nature (particularly the sea). Homer still lived and worked for 35 years after the last print in this exhibit was made.

Imagine being one of the sailors on the ship. What do you feel, hear, see, and smell?

What kind of mood or emotion is created here? How?
**Suggested Classroom Activities:** to be used in conjunction with a visit to the museum and/or an in-class discussion of selected artworks

**Art Projects and Discussion Starters**

- **Create** today’s version of *Snap the Whip* or *The Noon Recess*. How will the image be different from Homer’s? What will be the same? Students should also look to Homer’s techniques for depicting motion and depth. (VA:Cr1.2)

- Wood engravings use hatching and cross-hatching techniques to create value. **Practice** using these methods to create value scales then try simple geometric forms or still-life objects. Reflect on the process—is it more or less difficult than shading smoothly? How does the shading technique affect the look of the finished drawing?

- **Curate** a mini-exhibition of Homer’s prints. There are countless ways to group the prints based on theme, time period, subject, etc. Students should select a set number of artworks based on one of these concepts, then write an introduction to their exhibition that explains their idea and why their chosen works fit. (VA:Pr4.1)

- **Practice revision** as Winslow Homer did with his different versions of *Snap the Whip*. Choose an existing work of your own to change. If a black-and-white medium was used originally, change it to color. What parts of the composition can you move, change, or remove? Consider the principles of balance, rhythm, focal point, and space in your changes. Reflect on how these changes affected the overall work—is one version of the picture “better”? If you created yet another version, what would you change? (VA:Cr3.1)

- **Divide** an existing artwork using a grid and assign each student to recreate a section of the grid, then reassemble the finished drawings. How close to the original does your class’ “copy” look? How well do the pieces fit together? Ask: if you were to try this process again, how could you improve? Is it difficult to create a unified artwork as a team?

- **Create an illustrated journal** as a class. Students should select a subject for their print that represents everyday life around school or their community, just as Homer illustrated everyday life where he lived. Create multiple prints that students share with each other to create their books, or photocopy paintings or drawings. Each student should write a creative story or a journalism-style piece to accompany the illustration.

**Extensions**

- **Creative Writing**: choose a character in a print and tell their story. What happened before the scene we see? What will happen next? You may make the illustration the starting or end point of your story, or place it in the middle of the action. (Optionally, illustrate a scene from your extended story.)

- **Journalism and History**: Research and write an article to accompany one of Homer’s prints. Use the title and clues from the image along with research about the time period to create an interesting and convincing article.

- **Social Studies**: The Civil War was the first war with widespread visual coverage, made possible by recent advances in printing technology. Discuss the impact of the technology of printing on learning and communication. What new technologies for communication and learning are available today? Compare and contrast these to printing. Compare and contrast with later wars and how technology affected communication about them (for example, the Vietnam War was the first with televised coverage).

- **Science**: After observing the dimmed lighting in the exhibition, conduct an experiment to see the effects of light on paper. Place classroom objects or cut out shapes on sheets of construction paper and leave them in a sunny spot. How long will it take for the paper to show fading? Check progress daily (or in the morning and afternoon on particularly sunny days).
Further reading and resources

- “As embedded artist with the Union army, Winslow Homer captured life at the front of the Civil War,” an article detailing Homer’s time spent documenting the war effort: [https://news.yale.edu/2015/04/20/embedded-union-troops-winslow-homer-documented-civil-war-art](https://news.yale.edu/2015/04/20/embedded-union-troops-winslow-homer-documented-civil-war-art)

- An exploration of Homer’s life through selected artworks from the National Gallery of Art: [https://www.nga.gov/education/winslow-homer.html](https://www.nga.gov/education/winslow-homer.html)

- Video explanation and demonstration of the wood engraving process, including tools used: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKmArlrjxLI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKmArlrjxLI)

- Online archive of Harper’s Weekly issues: [http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=harpersweekly](http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=harpersweekly)

- A selection of Civil War photography from the National Archive, great for comparison with Homer’s illustrations. Pre-select images rather than sharing link with students: [https://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war/photos](https://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war/photos)

- Find two posts about Homer and the exhibition on FWMoA’s blog, ARTICULATE, at [fwmoa.blog](http://fwmoa.blog)


- *A Weekend with Winslow Homer* by Ann K. Beneduce, 1996. Available at the Allen County Public Library.