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DISCOVER



How Winslow Homer Paintings Captured the Complex Social and Political Issues of His Era

Top Lists, Exhibition Reviews



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Eli Anapur

One of the best known and most beloved American artists of the 19th century, Winslow Homer is celebrated for his portrayals of American life and scenery, done in a realist manner, that touched upon the subjects of geopolitics, nature, and race.

Returning to his rich oeuvre and career, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is staging **the largest critical overview of his art** and life,

featuring 88 oil paintings and watercolors. The show focuses on struggle, a quintessential theme of his work - from images of the Civil War and Reconstruction engaged with the effects of the conflict on soldiers, landscape, and formerly enslaved people to captivating scenes of rescue and hunting, and monumental seascapes and tropical works painted throughout the Atlantic world.

” *By focusing on the theme of conflict across his art, this exhibition will raise timely questions about his significance and appeal, encouraging a fresh understanding of his deeply thoughtful approach to depicting complex social and political issues of his era—many of which remain pertinent today.* - Max Hollein, the Museum's Marina Kellen French Director

"This exhibition will challenge the popular conception of him as the 'Yankee' realist who painted mostly Northeastern subjects," said **Sylvia Yount**, exhibition co-curator and the Lawrence A. Fleischman Curator in Charge of the American Wing. The focused approach will *"highlight his continuing relevance in his exploration of universal themes, including human beings' struggle with one another, with nature, and with mortality,"* added **Stephanie L. Herdrich**, Associate Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture and the exhibition co-curator

The exhibition *Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents* will be on view at [The Met](#) in New York **until July 31st, 2022.**

Crosscurrents is curated by Stephanie L. Herdrich and Sylvia Yount

at The Met, in collaboration with Christopher Riopelle, The Neil Westreich Curator of Post-1800 Painting at the National Gallery, London.

Take a look at some of the highlights of the show!

Featured image: artist and illustrator Winslow Homer - Dressing for the Carnival, 1877, Oil on canvas. 20 x 30in. (50.8 x 76.2cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1922 (22.220). Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Eagle Head, Manchester, Massachusetts (High Tide), 1870

Created after the American Civil War, *Eagle Head, Manchester, Massachusetts (High Tide)* is showing women drying up after swimming offers a respite to the viewers from the heavy war images Homer was previously known for. The contrast in the topic was met with criticism, as the subject was deemed too trivial for the famous painter of war scenes. Details, such as the "*exceedingly red-legged and ungainly*" appearance of the women, attracted critics' attention, as well as the novel subject - **women at leisure**.

It was recorded that Homer returned from the war changed and that even his best friends didn't recognize him. In looking to recover from the trauma of the war, he turned to leisure and captured this quintessentially modern subject.

Featured image: Winslow Homer - Eagle Head, Manchester, Massachusetts (High Tide), 1870, Oil on canvas. 26 x 38 in. (66 x 96.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. William F. Milton, 1923 (23.77.2). Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Old Mill (The Morning Bell), 1871

After the Civil War, new roles opened up for women in the wage economy. With more men absent from the workforce, women joined in, and the painting shows a beginning of a workday, announced by the morning bell. However, Homer didn't leave a straight narrative - here, an elegantly dressed woman is going towards the mill while a group of others remains behind, possibly gossiping about her untypical working attire, raising questions

about who she is and what is her social status.

The painting emphasizes **the changing social sphere**, where more women had to start working, and rural and urban communities clashed in a rapidly industrialized nation.

Featured image: Winslow Homer - Old Mill (The Morning Bell), 1871, Oil on canvas. 24 × 38 1/8 in. (61 × 96.8 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903 (1961.18.26). Photo courtesy Yale University Art Gallery



Breezing Up (A Fair Wind), 1873–76

The painting was developed from preparatory works Homer made over the course of three years, finalizing the piece in 1876 when the nation celebrated its centennial. An important segment of Homer's oeuvre make coastal and sea images, many of which he created while residing in his studio in Maine. The optimistic symbolism of *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)* is underscored by details Homer developed over the years, becoming an important maritime illustrator, with some of the works held today at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

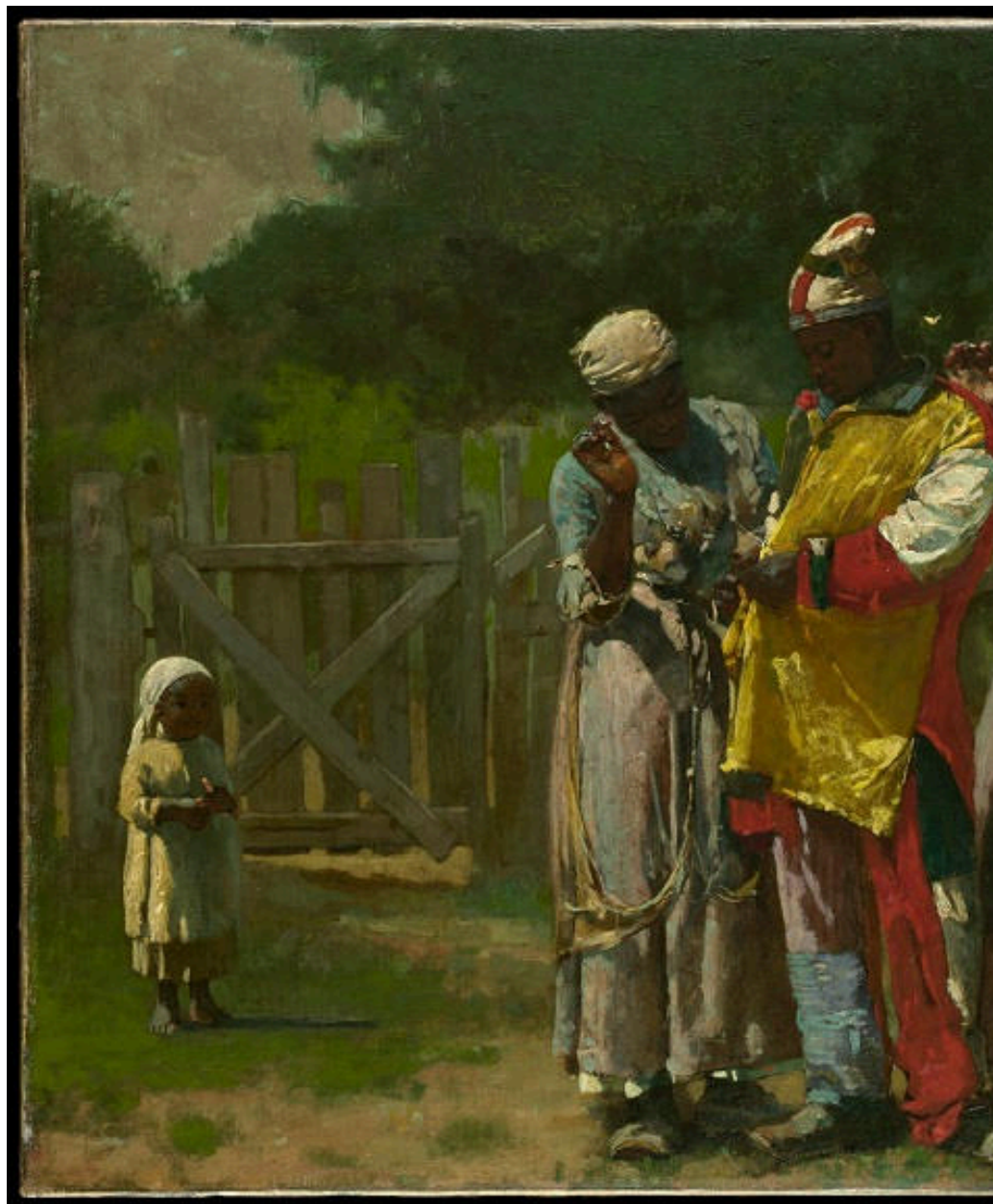
Throughout his career, Homer visited many coastal places, including the traditional fishing community of Cullercoats, Tyne and Wear in the north-east of England, and finally settled for the studio on the rocky coast of Maine from which he would observe fishing and other maritime activities.

Breezing Up or *A Fair Wind* shows a group of three boys and a man cruising the waves near Gloucester, Massachusetts. In an earlier version, the older man steered the vessel, but in the final one, Homer put the rudder in the hand of one of the boys. With the younger generation charting a path into the future and adding an anchor on the bow representing security and hope, Homer offered a positive expression of **the nation's future**, smoothly sailing ahead into the 20th century.

Featured image: artist Winslow Homer - Breezing Up (A Fair Wind), 1873–76, Oil on canvas. 24 3/16 x 38 3/16 in. (61.5 x 97 cm). National Gallery of Art,

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

Photo courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington



Dressing for the Carnival, 1877

The painting belongs to **the Reconstruction era**, a period after the American Civil War. After returning to Virginia, Homer observed the changes and the devastation the war left behind, especially

among Black communities.

The group's central figure presents a character from a Christmas celebration - **Jonkonnu** - observed by enslaved people of the region, which elements are incorporated into the Independence Day celebrations. Jonkonnu is rooted in the traditions of the British West Indies, with the festival blending both African and European traditions.

Black women and children became the focus of Homer in this period. After the loss of Black men to the war, women became central to the reconstruction of Black life. Here, they are sewing the costume of the man in the center and symbolically rebuilding that life.

Featured image: Winslow Homer - Dressing for the Carnival, 1877, Oil on canvas. 20 x 30in. (50.8 x 76.2cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Amelia B. Lazarus Fund, 1922 (22.220). Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art





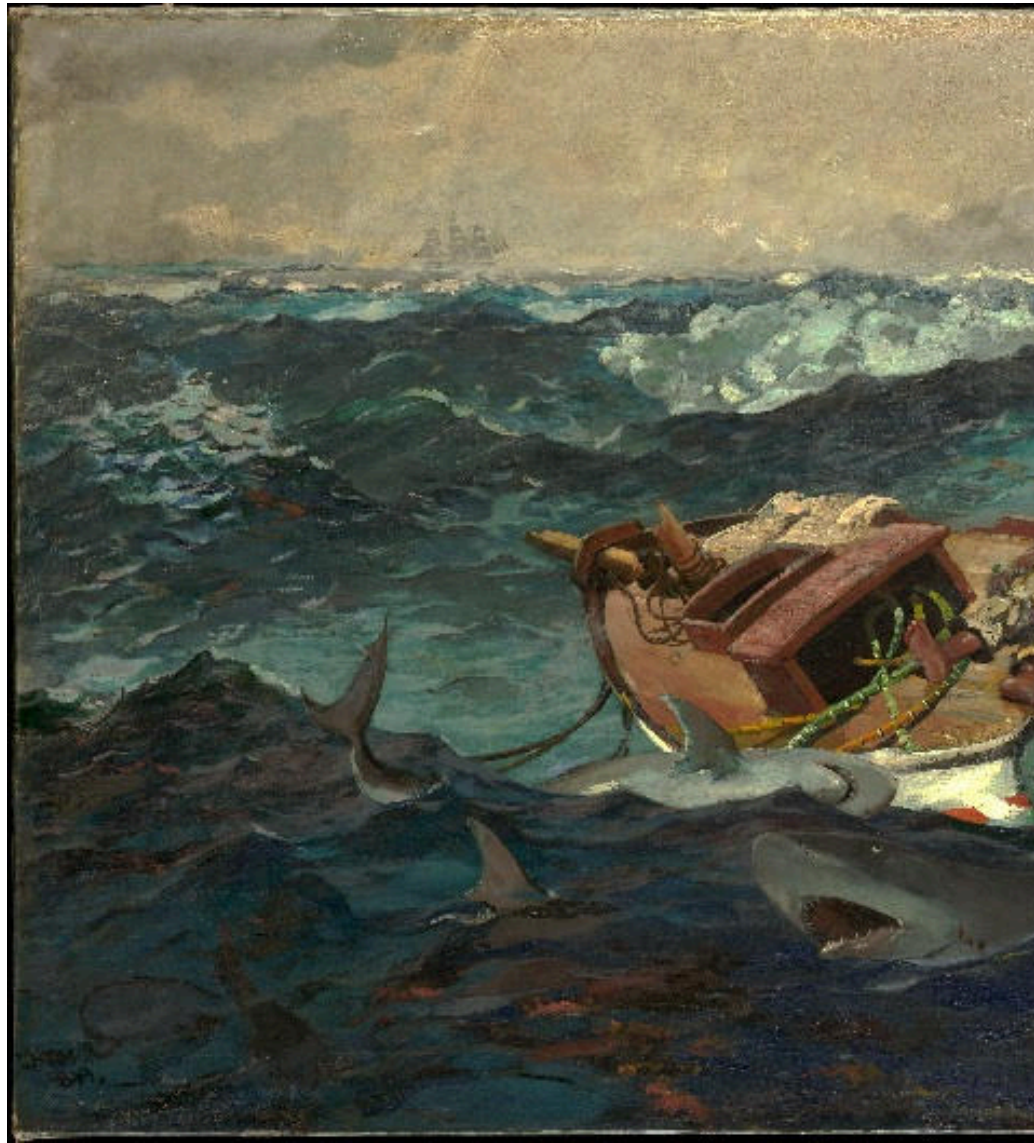
A Garden in Nassau, 1885

Poinsettias and the branches of a palm reach over a tall coral and limestone wall that separates the garden of a private residence from the outer world. The watercolor was made in the Bahamas, where Homer went on vacation. While some dismissed the watercolors he made there as mere vacation sketches, they were actually keen observations on **the segregation** and exclusion of

Black community from aspects of Bahamian society.

A child in the painting looks at the palm trees but is separated from them by the wall. Homer originally included two figures climbing over the gate to get coconuts but later erased them to make a simpler composition.

Featured image: Winslow Homer - A Garden in Nassau, 1885, Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on wove paper. 14 1/2 x 21 in. (36.8 x 53.3 cm). Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago, Daniel J. Terra Collection (1994.10). Image courtesy Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago / Art Resource, NY



The Gulf Stream, 1899

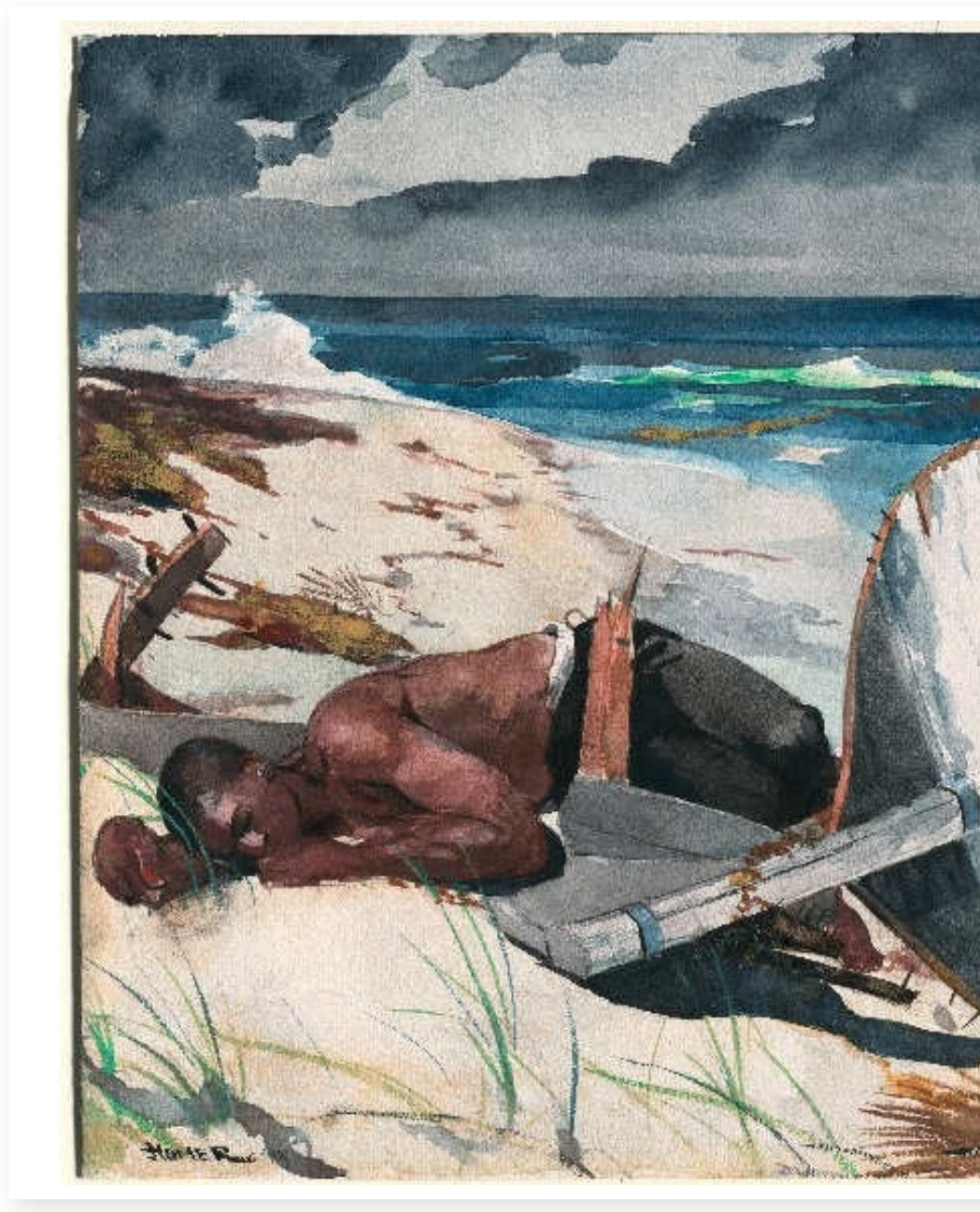
The oceanic frontier was central in Homer's art. The Gulf Stream embodies this preoccupation with other key themes in his art, such as humankind's relationship to nature, the power of the ocean, and the struggle between humans and nature.

The Gulf Stream is a water current that carries the waters of the Caribbean up the US East Coast and across the Atlantic over to Europe. It is also a trajectory of the spaces where Homer painted

and a reflection on a political turmoil of the time in the wake of the 1898 Spanish-Cuban-American War.

The center of the painting is taken by a Black figure on a vessel, surrounded by sharks and a turbulent sea, emphasizing a sense of isolation and mortality.

Featured image: Winslow Homer - The Gulf Stream, 1899, Oil on canvas. 28 1/8 x 49 1/8 in. (71.4 x 124.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1906 (06.1234). Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art



After the Hurricane, Bahamas, 1899

The seashore was a place of particular interest for Homer. He was fascinated with the relationship between **humans and the sea**, a relationship that could be both sustaining and perilous. In *After the Hurricane*, Homer focuses on the aftermath of a storm, with a Black figure shown lying on the beach, dead or unconscious.

Some interpreted the piece as a tragic conclusion of *The Gulf Stream*, where the protagonist was already shown in peril.

Featured image: Winslow Homer - After the Hurricane, Bahamas, 1899, Watercolor and graphite on wove paper. 14 5/8 x 21 3/8 in. (37.2 x 54.2 cm). The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection (1933.1235). Image courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY



**Searchlight on Harbor Entrance, Santiago de Cuba,
1901**

Homer went to **Cuba** in 1885, a visit that inspired many of his pieces. He described the country as "*the riches field for an artist,*" but it was also a place of political struggles and a fight for independence.

The painting shows Morro Castle from the inside, a symbol of Spanish imperial power that would end after **the Spanish-American War**. The Spanish defenses are in darkness while the searchlight from the US fleet pierces through. The symbolism of the work is clear - the dark times of Spanish rule are soon to be over, with new light appearing on the horizon. However, this light did not mean independence for the Cubans but life under the new empire of the US.

Featured image: Winslow Homer - Searchlight on Harbor Entrance, Santiago de Cuba, 1901, Oil on canvas. 30 1/2 x 50 1/2 in. (77.5 x 128.3 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George A. Hearn,1906 (06.1282). Photo courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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