

The Herring Net

1885 by Winslow Homer



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Winslow Homer (1836–1910)

The Herring Net, 1885

Oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 48 3/8 in.

Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1937.1039.

Winslow Homer is one of the most acclaimed American realist painters of the 19th century. His landscape and genre paintings are emblematic of post-Civil War America. Instead of concentrating on historic events of this tumultuous period, Homer chose to depict the natural environment that surrounded him, and the ordinary, daily existence of American men and women. In *The Herring Net*, we catch a glimpse of two fishermen at work off the coast of Prout's Neck, Maine.

Winslow Homer was born on February 24, 1836, in Boston, Massachusetts. His father owned a hardware business and his mother was a watercolor painter who exposed Homer to art at an early age. Homer's family left Boston when he was six and moved to the countryside, where his love for nature began. Rather than stay inside and study, young Winslow ran in the fields and fished in nearby streams. After graduating from high school, he became an apprentice in a printing shop and later worked as an illustrator for magazines. His early illustrations were mainly genre scenes, depicting the leisure and outdoor activities of high society in Boston and New York. In 1861, however, the magazine Harper's Weekly assigned Homer to cover the Civil War as a visual journalist. His realistic depictions of that war started his career as a painter.

Homer spent much of his early career in New York City, where he moved in 1859. Though largely a self-taught artist, he attended art classes during his first two years there. His nature, however, proved too independent for the classroom and impelled him to travel. He visited England, Canada, Cuba, the Bahamas, and Florida in search of inspiration. In the 1870s, fascinated by the power of the sea, he spent time in New England fishing villages. In 1881, Homer traveled to London, England, but quickly grew bored with the hectic urban lifestyle and made his way up the coast to Cullercoats, a small fishing community on the North Sea, near the popular resort of Tynemouth. The seaside provided a new direction for his artwork. Rather than continue to paint carefree scenes of summer tourists, he began painting rugged fishermen, mysterious cloud series, fog, light effects on water, and the powerful waves of the sea. These new paintings were simple, honest, and majestic, possessing raw

emotion and human drama.

After returning to America in late 1882, Homer decided to leave his studio in New York and move to Prout's Neck, Maine, a favorite summer vacation spot for the Homer family. Friends and colleagues interpreted this move as a need for isolation; however, the real motivation was Homer's growing interest in the sea as a subject. Although he acquired a reputation of being a reclusive man, he came from a very close-knit family. Many family members spent the summer months at Prout's Neck. In fact, his older brother Charles purchased a large amount of land there with the intention of developing it into a summer resort. Beginning in 1884, Homer filled his winter months with trips to the Bahamas, Cuba, and Florida.

Homer insisted on privacy when he painted. Believing that painters should be inspired by first-hand experiences, he built his studio on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean, where he observed the daily tasks of fishermen and their battles with the sea. He enjoyed depicting the sea when it was the most dangerous, perhaps to make a statement about man's continuous struggle with nature.

Not only did Winslow Homer love to depict water, he used it as a medium for his artwork. Although *The Herring Net* is an oil painting, Homer painted many of his seascapes in watercolor. Watercolor was referred to as the "traveler's medium," because it was easy to transport and dried quickly; it allowed artists to observe nature firsthand and finish a painting in one sitting. Homer would take along his watercolors on his various travels. Many of his watercolors served as color sketches for later oil paintings. His watercolors were loose and fresh, full of vibrant colors and intimacy. As these works were exhibited and published they also encouraged other artists to experiment with that medium. Although he believed that his greatest contributions were in watercolors, Homer saved his deepest thoughts about man's challenges with nature for oils.

The Herring Net is one such painting. Winslow Homer once stated, "To paint nature, you must wait patiently for the wonderful effect. Then, you must be able to recognize it!"¹ In his sea paintings, Homer would predetermine the desired lighting effects, then wait for days, weeks, or even months, for nature to comply. In 1884, a large school of herring came to nearby Straton's Island, attracting a huge fishing fleet. Homer hired a boy to row him out to this fleet, and sketched the men and boats until nightfall. The Art Institute's painting is based on several sketches made at this time.

In *The Herring Net*, we see two anonymous fishermen, one young and one old, struggling with a large net of herring as their dory (small row boat) rocks unsteadily in the rough waves of the Atlantic Ocean. With their obscured facial features and large hats, the fishermen do not represent specific individuals, but rather, humanity in general. Unaware of the viewer, the figures are absorbed in their task and their survival. The relationship between these two men is significant on several levels. Homer chose to represent the life cycle by depicting one figure as younger, early in his life, and the other as an experienced older man, nearing the end of his life. The two figures also symbolize the dependence humans have on one another. This battle with the sea could not be won alone: the older man struggles to haul in the large net of fish, while the young boy creates a balance by perching precariously on the edge of the dory. Through these efforts, both men demonstrate courage and strength. Homer also creates a sense of isolation in this painting: the small size of the boat in the vast sea gives an overwhelming feeling that these men are alone in their struggles. Four or five schooners loom on the distant horizon, intensifying this feeling of isolation.

The elemental conflict of man versus nature is emphasized by the contrasting patterns of light, colors, and lines. The sunlight peeking through the haze brings our attention to the pyramidal shape formed by the two men, the boat, the diagonal of the net, and the sinking wave in the lower left corner.² On the right, the red buoy in the water, the silver flesh of the fish, and the waves shimmer brightly in the sunlight. However, on the left, the waves and the two figures contrast the bright colors with mysterious, deep tones. Homer added further color contrast by creating a delicate background with soft brown and gray hues.

The same year Homer painted *The Herring Net*, he completed two other paintings, *The Fog Warning* and *Lost on the Grand Banks*, which also focused on fishermen in small dories. In these works, Homer concentrated on the two other major fish found off the New England coast, halibut and cod. These paintings were exhibited together for the first time in 1893 at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. As a body of work, Homer's paintings created a "noble epic," depicting the difficult and sometimes tragic lifestyle of men at sea.³ Later in his life, Homer's fascination with the sea intensified so much that he eliminated the human subject in his paintings altogether, and focused solely on natural elements. He continued to paint at Prout's Neck for 25 years, until his death in 1910.

1. "Artist of the Outdoors," *Scholastic Art*, Dec.1992–Jan.1993, v.23 n.3, p.3.

2. Cikovsky, Nicolai. *Winslow Homer*. Washington DC: The National Gallery of Art, 1995, p. 227.

3. Cikovsky, Nicolai. *Winslow Homer*. Washington DC: The National Gallery of Art, 1995, p. 227.

Questions & Activities

The Weather Report

Use *The Herring Net* as a starting point for a unit on the weather. Have students read the weather report from a forecast website. Pay close attention to the different things the forecast reports, such as precipitation, cloud coverage, temperature, and wind speed. After reading the report, have students write their own weather report at the day at sea based in *The Herring Net*. Ask students to read their weather reports aloud to one another: what are the most vivid adjectives you can think of to describe the scene? Then hold a discussion on how changes in the weather affect our emotions.

Come Explore Prout's Neck!

In the 1880s, the Homer family wanted to make Prout's Neck, Maine a popular summer resort. Have students create a travel brochure inviting people to experience the beauty of present-day Prout's Neck. Include information about lodging, transportation (how will they get there?), dining experiences, entertainment, souvenirs to buy, and wonderful sights to see.

Man vs. Nature

Read *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961). Compare/contrast the ideas that Hemingway discusses through this novel with Homer's *The Herring Net*. How do both the novel and the painting discuss man's relationship with nature? How do they both address life cycles?

A Fish Tale

Often we only hear one point of view to a story. In *The Herring Net* we find several characters in the story. Instead of writing the story through the viewpoint of the two men, have students tell a tale from a fish's viewpoint. Instruct students to include information about what is going through the herrings' heads as they are caught up in the net (or maybe they made a narrow escape!), where they will end up next, and how they feel about the day's events.

The Traveler's Medium

Winslow Homer enjoyed traveling and painted many of the sights he saw with watercolors. Have students experiment with watercolors in the classroom to learn about the fluid, watery quality of the paint. Distribute a white sheet of paper, watercolors, and a brush to each student. Have students brush water lightly onto one side of the paper. Next, have students dip their brush into a cup of water and then put a small amount of paint on the brush. Point out to students how the color runs and blends together on the wet paper. Have students use other colors to try mixing colors. On the dry half of the paper have students experiment with other brushstrokes, making both thin and thick lines. Once students feel comfortable with using watercolors, have students paint outside just as Winslow Homer did.

Glossary

buoy: a float, often having a bell or light, anchored in water as a warning of danger or as a marker for a channel.

genre: artworks in which the subjects are ordinary people engaged in everyday activities.

medium: a material used in artistic expression, such as oil paint, watercolor, etc. (pl. media)

realist: general term describing an intent to depict the appearance of the world. Also refers to a movement in 19th-century France that concentrated on the unidealized representation of "real and existing things," according to Realism's leader Gustave Courbet (1819–1877).

schooners: any of various large fore-and-aft rigged sailing ships with three to seven masts.

watercolor: any paint bound with a medium soluble in water and, more specifically, paint that is not lightened by addition of white but thinned with water, producing the effect of translucence or transparency of color.

