

Winslow Homer, one of the most acclaimed American painters of the 19th century, began his career as an illustrator for *Harper's Weekly* during the Civil War. After the war he settled in New York and painted **genre** scenes featuring women and children. Fascinated by the power of the sea, Homer spent time in New England coastal towns during the 1870s. In 1881 he traveled to England and visited a small fishing village near the North Sea. The area provided a new subject for his work, and he began painting the hardy fisherfolk, mysterious fog, and powerful waves of the sea. In 1884 the artist moved to Prout's Neck, Maine, where he continued to portray the daily tasks of fishermen and their battles with the sea. Paintings like *The Herring Net* focus on the relationship between man and nature.

In this painting, Homer depicted the heroic effort of two fishermen at their daily work as they struggle to pull a net of herring into their small boat. With their obscured facial features and large hats, the fishermen do not represent specific individuals, but rather humanity in general. The two figures loom large against the mist on the horizon. Several **schooners** are dimly visible in the background. While one fisherman hauls in the glistening herring, the other unloads the catch.

Homer's style in this painting represents a dramatic change from his earlier works such as *Croquet Scene* (see below). His color palette is more subdued and the scale of his figures and his canvases is more monumental. No longer is nature peaceful and sunny; instead it is dark and stormy. There is a feeling of isolation as the small boat is far away from the schooners in the background. Homer indicated the physical exertion required by placing one of the figures on the side of the boat to counterbalance the weight of the fish being pulled up in the net. With teamwork so necessary for survival, both men strive to steady the precarious boat as it rides the incoming swells, suggesting the elemental conflict between man and nature. Homer continued to explore this theme in his art until his death in 1910.

THEMES:

Economics

Nature and Environment

Image 7



Winslow Homer

(American, 1836–1910)

The Herring Net, 1885

Oil on canvas

76.5 x 122.9 cm (30 1/8 x 48 3/8 in.)

Mr. and Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection

1937.1039

RELATED
WORKWinslow Homer, *Croquet Scene*

Almost two decades separate the creation of *The Herring Net* from *Croquet Scene*, and although both paintings were based on observations of contemporary life, there was a drastic shift of mood and theme in Homer's work in this period. After his work as an illustrator during the Civil War, Homer turned his attention to aspects of contemporary life and painted themes of upper-class leisure in post-Civil War America. *Croquet Scene* depicts three women and a man playing croquet on a lawn. Croquet, recently introduced to the United States, allowed men and women to interact in ways that were not otherwise socially acceptable in the Victorian era. (In 1866 Milton Bradley, the toy manufacturer, patented the first mass-produced croquet set in the United States.)¹

Women are the dominant figures in the painting, and their interaction with the men is consistent with the etiquette of the game, which allowed females to compete with males as long as they conducted themselves with elegance and grace. The woman in red raises her skirt in order to put her foot on her ball and knock it against the ball of her opponent. The man, in a chivalrous act, kneels down to adjust the ball so that the lady can maintain her pose. His posture also gives him a rare, titillating view of her ankle, however. The long shadows on the left indicate that this game is being played in the afternoon.² Homer's attention

Winslow Homer

(American, 1836–1910)

***Croquet Scene*, 1866**

Oil on canvas

40.3 x 66.2 cm (15 7/8 x 26 1/16 in.)

Friends of American Art Collection; Goodman Fund
1942.35

to effects of sunlight outdoors and his decision to depict leisure activities of the fashionable middle class recall the subjects of French **Impressionism**, which he may have seen during a trip to Paris in 1866–67.

THEME:

Identity

Related Works, Terra Foundation for American Art:

Winslow Homer, *On Guard*, 1864

The Whittling Boy, 1873

Web site: www.terraamericanart.org/collections

1 Barter, *American Arts*, 1998, p. 224.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 224–225.