

ART REVIEW

# Winslow Homer's Transforming Odyssey

An exhibition reveals how a sojourn in an English fishing village changed the American painter's work

BY LANCE ESPLUND

**IF THE AMERICAN** Worcester, Mass. illustrator and painter Winslow Homer had been born in Italy or France a generation or two earlier, he might have depicted grand mythological scenes inspired by Ovid. But he was born in Boston in 1836 and died in Prout's Neck, Maine, in 1910. By the time Homer was 19, when he began a lifelong career doing commercial illustrations and, soon thereafter, pursued oil and watercolor painting, the Realists had purged painting of traditional religious, historical and mythological subjects, and the Impressionists were on the verge of painting not the landscape but its light.

Homer's most celebrated dramas, then—some of them played out in the American countryside, but most set on coastlines and at sea—were Realist renditions of everyday struggles between nature and human beings elevated to mythical proportions. In his signature landscape "Hark! The Lark" (1882), which Homer considered his "very best" painting, three young women working in a field are suddenly halted by birdsong, a scene Homer transforms, through their repetitive gestures and startled expressions, into near melodrama. And he poses his actors like Greco-Roman pediment figures in his iconic seascapes "The Gale" (1883-93), in which a woman, a babe on her back, steels herself against the North Sea's winds, and "The Life Line" (1884), the rescue of a woman in danger of being snatched back into roiling surf.

These three paintings are among some 50 pictures by Homer in "Coming Away: Winslow Homer

and England," a splendid, thought-provoking exhibition at the Worcester Art Museum that travels this spring to Milwaukee. Co-organized by WAM's Elizabeth Athens and the Milwaukee Art Museum's Brandon Ruud, "Coming Away" poses fascinating questions about the fluid nature of aesthetic influence and about what it means to be an American, a New England or even a "Yankee" artist.

From March 1881 to November 1882, Homer lived among the inhabitants and painters of Cullercoats, a small fishing village on England's northeastern coast. The show posits that this trip—more, perhaps, than his years illustrating the American Civil War and Reconstruction, or his yearlong sojourn in France, from 1866-67—transformed Homer, enabling him to develop his mature vision as a renowned seascape painter. The argument, as presented here, is sound.

"Coming Away" is divided into three sections: before, during and after his trip to England. Mixing Homer's pictures with those of such painters as the British master J.M.W. Turner and the French Realist Jules Breton, as well as photographs depicting nature and Classical antiquities, it shows not just the power of artistic influence but the authoritative inspiration of place.

Homer was infamously tight-lipped concerning his personal life and influences. Yet, to walk through any major Homer exhibition is to sense the impact of Turner, the Pre-Raphaelites and the French painters Corot, Delacroix, Millet, Courbet, Gérôme and Manet. And it is also to experience Homer's influence on Americans Howard Pyle, the Wyeths, John Marin, Arthur Dove and Norman Rockwell. Homer spanned

Europe and America; Cullercoats appears to be the bridge.

More often than not, his early pictures' figures feel unnatural and overwrought. Homer treats his people, on whom he lavishes too many persnickety details, differently from their environments, losing a sense of the whole. In "Croquet Players" (1865), the figures appear to glide above the lawn. In such works as "Sparrow Hall" (c. 1881-82) and "The Mussel Gatherers" (1881-82), the spaces are light-filled and easy to navigate until you come to the figures, which feel stilted, staged and pasted onto their settings, like puppets in a toy theater.

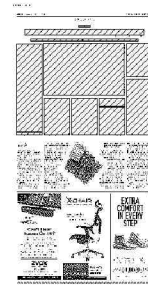
This problem persists in many of his early seascapes—his human subjects illustrated and posed, not interpreted and felt. Yet this approach changes considerably after Cullercoats.

In "Moonlight, Wood Island Light" (1894), a canvas Homer probably painted on the beach, forms, paint, surf and light are integrated, active and immediate. And in "Driftwood" (1909)—perhaps his best and final major canvas, in which a fisherman is blocked from accessing the sea by a giant piece of driftwood—foreground, middle-ground and background all advance like a wave breaking against us. We feel immersed in the coastal spray and wind. In these late works, Homer buries the albatross of illustrator at sea.

**Coming Away: Winslow Homer and England**

Worcester Art Museum, through Feb. 4, 2018

*Mr. Esplund writes about art for the Journal.*





FROM LEFT: PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART; MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM



Homer's 'Hark! The Lark' (1882), above, and 'The Life Line' (1884), left