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Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents by Stephanie L. Herdrich and
Sylvia Yount (review)

Jan Garden Castro

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WINSLOW HOMER: CROSSCURRENTS

Stephanie L. Herdrich and Sylvia Yount

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Distributed by Yale University Press)

<https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9781588397478/winslow-homer/>

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Jan Garden Castro

Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents, the catalog for the exhibition traveling to the National Gallery, London (10 September 2022–8 January 2023), underscores the show's point: Homer applied his powerful painting prowess and narrative talent to capture both ocean and societal crosscurrents. Sylvia Yount terms this his "lifelong concerns with race and the environment." Yount is the Lawrence A. Fleischman Curator in Charge of the American Wing of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her colleague Stephanie L. Herdrich, Associate Curator of American Painting and Sculpture in the American Wing, closes the volume by discussing how the artist framed race, class, and gender disparities as he painted nature's magnificence and its destructive force. *The Gulf Stream*, an 1899 painting reworked by 1906, is the show's centerpiece, displaying a lone Black man adrift at sea in a boat with a broken mast, surrounded by sharks. Homer used the sea literally and metaphorically in an age following the Civil War and Reconstruction, when Jim Crow laws and racist violence marginalized and endangered the Black populace.

Herdrich's essay, "Crosscurrents: Conflict, Nature, and Mortality in Winslow Homer's Art," dives into the vortex of this exhibition and painting as she quotes curator H. Barbara Weinberg's comment that *The Gulf Stream* and other paintings "seem to ask as many questions as they answer." The same could be said about this exhibition and catalog. Experts mention Homer's one month of classes in the Barbizon style in New York and mostly speculate about the rest of his art education. Even though Homer's father and brother

are mentioned and seem central to his life, readers learn almost nothing about Homer's family or friends. We are sent to footnoted sources if we're curious about whether he had any romantic relationships. Similarly, we are told that the water currents of the Atlantic are central to Homer's body of work but given only general information that Homer's knowledge of this body of water came from oceanographer Matthew Fontaine Maury and was filtered through a religious source, George Chaplin Child, who believed in divine providence. Ocean patterns are discussed only as they were historically understood in 1857. Herdrich's best discussion of currents is in her consideration of *The Herring Net* (1885), where she points out "the inherent dangers of fishing the Grand Banks, the rich waters southeast of Newfoundland, where the cold Labrador Current meets the relatively warm Gulf Stream." The authors do not update Maury's notions of how ocean currents operate. Readers are left to their own resources to update this by factoring climate change into Homer's portraits of land and sea and to ponder, as Homer did, how humans variously interact with nature and how race, class, gender, and north-south cultural differences were also crosscurrents.

Herdrich delves into how Homer took years to finalize *The Gulf Stream*. Using elements of sharks and a boat disaster he had painted in 1885, he added more menacing sharks. In the final composition, the sugarcane from the sketches is more central and sharks more numerous and menacing, without going as far as the 1885 watercolor showing sharks circling a tipping, now-empty boat. There is no discussion of the use of threatening, open-mouthed sharks as a symbol in earlier art. According to Adelheid M. Gealt, emerita professor specializing in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century iconography, a J. S. Copley 1778 painting with an open-mouthed shark alludes to Rubens's 1618 *Jonah and the Whale*. Hopeful signs in Homer's painting are a possible rescue ship on the far horizon and word links to family and America—the boat is named Anna, and its port of origin is Key West.

In 1899, Homer revealed to a friend that he considered *The Gulf Stream's* figures "of about the same value to the picture" as those in J. M. W. Turner's *Slave Ship* (1840), which was based on a historic 1781 incident when the captain threw 130 slaves whom he considered sick or dying overboard in the face of a threatening storm. Homer first saw *Slave Ship* at the home of one of his patrons, Met founder John Taylor Johnston, in 1872. This hints at the

role patronage may have played in influencing how Homer chose and posed his compositions. At times he referred to the painting's subject as the Gulf Stream itself; at others, he refused to discuss its meaning. The Met did not purchase this painting until 1906, after he had reworked it.

In "Reconsidering Winslow Homer: Methods and Meanings," Yount recounts how interpretations of Homer's (1836–1910) complete works have changed over the decades up to our own. In general, Lloyd Goodrich's initial characterization of Homer as an American Realist has broadened to show that his scope, subject choices, and themes were more nuanced and complex. Yount notes that Homer suffered from hunger in 1862 and saw hunger, typhoid fever, and death in army camps. His *Trooper Meditating beside a Grave* (c. 1865) shows a uniformed Confederate soldier beside a grave, and his *Sharpshooter* (1863) shows a Union soldier in a tree targeting a distant victim—two of many close-ups about how the Civil War brought death and divisions.

Daniel Immerwahr's essay, "Frontier, Ocean, Empire: Vistas of Expansion in Winslow Homer's United States," examines Homer in the context of the United States' expansion from twenty-four to forty-eight states during his lifetime, and the "anxieties" during a period of colonization and conquest. He argues that Homer realized that the Atlantic seacoast was a "choppy, dark, and dangerous space" for sailors and even for beachgoers. Immerwahr suggests that Homer was conscious, too, of the roles the ocean played in slavery and colonialism. He notes that Derek Walcott's 1990 epic poem *Omeros* posits that *The Gulf Stream's* Black man has his head turned "towards Africa."

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw's "'The Various Color and Types of Negroes': Winslow Homer Learned to Paint Race" suggests that painting non-white subjects was not done well in Homer's time and that Homer's depictions were fresher than those by most artists of his era. Shaw notes that the rise of racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan contributed to racist attitudes. Homer got his start as an illustrator for *Harper's Weekly*; he evidently was threatened by whites during a period around 1875 when he was painting black subjects in Virginia. *The Cotton Pickers* (1876) is a close-up of two young girls with warm brown skin in a vast cotton field under a cloudy sky. Their reflective expressions don't reveal their thoughts.

Shaw and other essayists variously discuss how Homer developed his mas-

tery of colors; evidently one important early source was Eugène Chevreul's *The Laws of Contrast of Colour: And Their Application to the Arts* (1859); however, this book didn't much shed light on how to paint non-white skin hues. By the time Homer painted *Dressing for the Carnival*, originally titled *Sketch—4th of July in Virginia* when it was exhibited in 1877, his keenly observant use of color and light to paint an entourage gathered around a Black carnival figure was based on his own color decisions.

Homer shaped most of his narratives upon actual experiences, but he would rework the details of each composition in his studio. The catalog variously notes that *Breezing Up* is optimistic, shows the tilted boat motif Homer favored, was developed over a three-year period from watercolors of a scene in Gloucester, Massachusetts (1873–76), and was altered to give the rudder to one of the three boys instead of to the adult in the boat. This was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1876 and “was recognized as a hopeful expression for the nation's future at its centennial.”

Christopher Riopelle's essay, “‘These Works Are Real’: Winslow Homer and Europe,” points out that Homer was under thirty when, in 1861, he decided to become a professional painter after a month studying the Barbizon style of landscape painting then popular in Europe. In Paris in 1866 and 1867 he exhibited two works at the Exposition Universelle. Riopelle argues that Homer's horizontal format for *Prisoners from the Front* (1866) may owe its nonhierarchical composition and postures to Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans* (1849–50), which initially displeased critics. In 1881 and 1882, Homer spent nineteen months painting in Cullercoats, a coastal British town where a life-saving brigade and archetypal images of women and heroism exposed him to the dangers of the North Sea and inspired paintings such as *The Life Line*, a dramatic rescue scene exhibited to acclaim in 1884 at the National Academy of Design in New York.

In the last section in the catalog, Herdrich points out that Homer experienced a hurricane in Gloucester on 24 August 1873 in which “Nine fishing vessels were lost and 128 men perished.” She cites this as one among many reasons why Homer painted men fishing during hazardous conditions. He also painted boys engaged in their own dangerous seaside adventures, a wife with her baby waiting for her man to come home, and a boy waiting for his

father at sea. Above all, the sea itself—its undertows, changing currents, pleasures, and challenges—was a subject of deep drama and study.

This exhibition and catalog reframes Winslow Homer's legacy, sets new high standards for exhibitions, and opens a large door for further interpretations of Homer's work. Homer's legacy as a major American painter was established at The Metropolitan Museum during his lifetime, and Lloyd Goodrich's subsequent championing of Homer, including a five-volume *catalogue raisonné*, provided a further substantial base. Homer composed action dramas with as yet unresolved universal predicaments to engage audiences. He addressed some race, gender, and class issues of his age as he labored to dramatize magnificent effects of sea, landscape, and architecture. The verdant landscape and the wooden buildings of *Old Mill* (1871) are as fully realized as the old hound, the middle-class girl in red on her way to her factory job, and poorly dressed country girls nearby making fun of her. Just as Courbet painted the kitchen help and women, Homer put a face onto the Black woman in a doorway *Near Andersonville* watching captured soldiers march by, Bahamian Black men fishing for turtles and sharks, and the dark-skinned child staring at the high walls of an estate she'd never enter except, perhaps, as a servant. There are few to no discussions about whether the characters in these paintings seem too posed, too buff, or too stereotypical. Homer's polished compositions and love of the natural world fit well into the history of art and continue to engage audiences.

This catalog, printed in Italy, alternates five illustrated essays and four sections of color plates. It deepens the exhibition and invites further explorations.

JAN GARDEN CASTRO (www.jancastro.com/) is a contributing editor for *Sculpture Magazine*. *Suntup's limited edition of Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale* (2022) features Castro's *Afterword*.