

ART110

Experimentation and Consistency in Winslow Homer's Artwork

Winslow Homer was considered to be one of the best American painters of the 19th century. Throughout his years of work, he experimented in art styles and themes to follow his life, and although his works stayed relatively the same, the tone of the art pieces had changed. Winslow Homer was born on February 26th, 1836, in Boston, Massachusetts. His family consisted of his father, Charles Savage Homer, an ill at ease business man, and his mother Henrietta Benson Homer, a watercolorist, along with 2 brothers. His education was average, however at an early age he had already shown signs of artistic talent. After graduating high school, at age 19 Winslow was signed up to be an apprentice to a Boston lithographer by his father, and worked there for 2 years. Around 1861, Winslow started working with oil paintings, such as Croquet scene, one of his earlier popular pieces.



Croquet Scene, 1861

Winslow used darker, more saturated colors in this painting, which he only continued to do for about a year. The background isn't defined, causing the player's and their outfits to become more present. He used more suggestive lighting by detailing the clothes, and not much depth can be seen. Around 1886, Homer traveled to Paris for a 10-month stay to explore his artistic abilities. During this trip Winslow improved on his skills and it can be seen in his works after the trip. After the trip, around the 1870's, was when Homer really began to define his style, and though he experimented he always kept these factors in his artworks. His pieces usually include a focal point like people or an animal, an open background, and neat, condensed colors. A good example is his piece is Gloucester Harbor, which uses all of the techniques mentioned above.



Gloucester Harbor, 1873

Homer uses concentrated and complementary colors on the sea and sky, using orange and blue to bring out their brightness. In the later 1870's Winslow starts to experiment by having the main focus be a woman, with a less full background. The backgrounds are simple, yet detailed, so they don't take away from the piece. He then began combining his two types of painting. He simplified his backgrounds a bit more but kept the open feeling, giving the painting

more space. This not only kept the people as the focal point, but added to the painting in general. Around this time he had also started experimenting with watercolor. However Homer does a great job by keeping the ranges of colors the same, making the difference between his oil paintings and his watercolor works less than noticeable. This new but consistent style can be seen in the watercolor painting *Two Scouts*. This painting's focal point are the two scouts, and



Two Scouts, 1887

while the background is still detailed with depth, he doesn't add a lot of colors or shading to it to show the detail on the scouts. The trees and forestline show this pretty well. Though they undeniably show detail, it is mostly the same color green with a few different shades placed lightly. It clearly shows what it's meant to be without adding too much to it so it contrasts the foreground. After this painting Winslow starts to focus on nature in his work. Many of his paintings focused on animals or people on boats. At this point as well, Homer has mostly transitioned to watercolor as well. This worked

well with his new focus, it gave the natural and smooth look that gave the painting a softer tone. He mainly uses a softer touch on clouds, snow, and grass, and contrasts it with the sharper lines of the boat, the rock's edge, and the water. This creates an interesting depth to the landscape and keeps the viewer engaged. Many of his paintings also use the color of the boat to add a new, unnatural color to the setting. The Guide

includes all of these features, creating a calm yet cinematic view. The straight lines and bright orange of the canoe is brought out even more compared to the soft and subtle background.



The Guide, 1895

The man in the painting keeps up with Homer's normal style, keeping it familiar with his other works of art. Homer also successfully creates an atmosphere by darkening the sky to maintain the shades and tones of the rest of the work. During the end of his painting career, Homer started focusing more on landscapes. He had improved a lot since his earlier work so the detail of his work is stunning. These are best shown through two paintings, *The Gulf Stream* and *The Turkey Buzzard*. Both of these focus on the landscape of the scene, and are incredibly detailed. Though the paintings have different textures, they exhibit the same skills. In *The Gulf Stream*, the main focus of detail was on the water. The color and shading of the water creates an impressive texture that compliments the texture of the boat. The sky is painted simply so as to not clash with the sea, and Homer adds clouds to keep from the blue of the sky and the blue of the sea from mixing. His method of painting water stays the same throughout his artistic



The Gulf Stream, 1906



The Turkey Buzzard, 1904

journey, while he experimented with other aspects of a landscape he usually kept to the same style of water. In *The Turkey Buzzard*, the main focus is the palm trees. Homer takes extra care when detailing the leaves of the tree to bring the viewers attention to it. He uses the same technique as his previous work by simplifying the background while still keeping it recognizable. He also keeps the water simple by keeping the shading to a low and keeping it at the very bottom of the painting. He also creates a nice contrast by adding small bits of yellow to the background. This creates a “pop” so to say to break up the dark forest in the back.

Overall, Winslow Homer deserves his recognition by creating engaging and stunning work. He improved by constantly experimenting with his focal points and details, but stayed consistent to stay true to his art. His subtle yet impactful changes to his style brings life to his art and creates a journey that is exciting to watch.

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