

**Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents**

Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York  
11th April–31st July

**Winslow Homer: Force of Nature**

National Gallery, London  
10th September 2022–  
8th January 2023

by NICHOLAS ROBBINS

In 1999 the artist Allan Sekula entered Lake Washington, near Seattle, and photographed himself swimming towards Bill Gates's shoreline home. The resulting photographs accompanied a letter the artist wrote to Gates in 2002 about his purchase of Winslow Homer's 1885 painting *Lost on the Grand Banks* for more than \$30 million. 'So why are you so interested in a picture of two poor lost dory fishermen, momentarily high on a swell, peering into a wall of fog?' Sekula wonders.<sup>1</sup> 'They are going to die, you know, and it won't be a pretty death'. The fishermen's position, adrift in a

vast and occluded world, seemed for Sekula to model the unmoored, exposed condition of workers in late global capitalism. 'And as for you', he asks Gates, 'are you lost? Or found?'

Like Sekula, who saw in Homer the 'hidden brutality' of extractive labour and empire, this exhibition presses its visitors to see anew the dislocation, violence and social misery that course through the artist's work. Setting Homer's work against the emergence of the United States as a global power in the later nineteenth century – and the wider history of war, slavery and empire in the Americas – *Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents* and its catalogue also resituated the often isolated, frozen figures of his paintings within history.<sup>2</sup> The exhibition was curated by Stephanie Herdrich and Sylvia Yount, in association with Christopher Riopelle, who has also organised a smaller version of the show, which opens at the National Gallery, London, this month.<sup>3</sup>

At the centre of the iteration at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,

where it was seen by this reviewer, was a painting that emerges from the matrix of these historical conditions: Homer's *The Gulf Stream* (Fig.17). The painting shows a Black man adrift on a mastless boat, circled by sharks. Harsh sun glints on his skin, a watery vortex looms at the horizon (as does a ghostly ship). Early viewers were disquieted by thoughts of this man's impending death. In her wide-ranging catalogue essay, which addresses themes of mortality and conflict in Homer's work, Herdrich references a famous letter the artist wrote to his dealer, M. Knoedler & Co., New York, in 1902. In it Homer responded sarcastically to anxious queries about the painting, stating that its viewers could be informed that this man 'will be rescued & returned to his friends and home & ever after live happily' (p.143). The point, for Homer, was that his paintings avoided simple closure. He insisted, instead, that the painting was about the Gulf Stream itself. As the historian Daniel Immerwahr notes in his catalogue essay on

17. *The Gulf Stream*, by Winslow Homer. 1899, reworked by 1906. Oil on canvas, 71.4 by 124.8 cm. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).



## Exhibitions

Homer and American imperialism, this warm current of water, flowing from the Caribbean to northern Europe, provided the natural infrastructure for the transatlantic slave trade and colonial commodity networks. *The Gulf Stream* stood in the exhibition as an emblem of Homer's persistent ambivalence about the relationship of individuals to such enormous, almost invisible systems – both historical and natural.

Born in 1836 in Boston and trained in a lithographer's studio, Homer emerged to prominence as an artist in the 1860s, lacking any of the European education considered a prerequisite for painters. This fact was central to his status as a uniquely 'native' American painter of rugged scenery and rural leisure. But as recent work has underscored, Homer's travels outside the borders of the north-east United States deeply shaped his work, not only his time in Paris in 1866–67 but also his 1881 stay in Cullercoats, a fishing village in north-east England.<sup>4</sup> Less attention has been paid to the effect of Homer's repeated visits between 1884 and 1903 to the transnational, colonial space of the Caribbean, including Florida, the Bahamas, Bermuda and Cuba.<sup>5</sup> His works made in and about the

**18. *Hurricane, Bahamas*, by Winslow Homer. 1898. Watercolour and graphite on wove paper, 36.7 by 53.5 cm. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).**

Caribbean archipelago, amid his crossings and recrossings of the Gulf Stream, formed the core of what was otherwise a broad survey – suggesting that the issues of power, violence and race that surface in his Caribbean works echo both forwards and backwards in the artist's career.

The exhibition was organised into eight roughly chronological sections gathering works around key themes. It opened with paintings made during the American Civil War, when Homer produced celebrated woodcut illustrations for *Harper's Weekly*. His painting *Sharpshooter* (1863; Portland Museum of Art, Maine) portrays a Union Army gunman perched in a tree. This kind of hovering viewpoint – dislocated from its ground yet unmistakably enmeshed in a larger world – returns constantly in his work, both as an imagined vantage of his painted subjects and the position of the painter's virtual eye.<sup>6</sup> His images of war and 'camp life' were followed by a series of ambiguous images of post-war social reassembly. The war's aftershocks might be seen, for example, telegraphing through the tenuously linked chain of young Northern schoolboys at play in *Snap the whip* (Fig.19), as one child is sent sprawling toward the earth by the transmitted force.

Homer also attended to the ways that racism and the afterlives of slavery continued to delimit the lives of Black Americans. Although this attentiveness was relatively anomalous at the time, its articulation had limits. As Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw argues in her catalogue essay, Homer's paintings of Black subjects in this period were shaped by tropes and techniques derived from minstrelsy and artistic theories of colour calibrated to celebrate light skin. The incompleteness of emancipation – shadowed by the racial terror unleashed during Reconstruction – haunts the halting, restrained encounter of a group of women with their former enslaver in *A visit from the old mistress* (1876; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington). The two young women in his *Cotton pickers* (1876; Los Angeles County Museum of Art), meanwhile, confront their continued confinement in a world of voracious commerce. That the latter painting was bought (as the artist had hoped) by an English cotton merchant demonstrates how Homer's work was enmeshed in a trans-Atlantic world of plantation economies.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas this section suggested how violence took hold as a central subject in Homer's work, the next two sections considered how the Atlantic – a site of leisure, commerce and peril – emerged as a significant subject for the artist. His time spent painting in the fishing port of Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1873 and 1880, followed by his trip to Cullercoats, resulted in works that turn on the confrontation of its figures with the forces of the oceanic world. This sometimes took the form of highly charged scenes, as in the twisting conglomeration of bodies suspended in *The life line* (1884; Philadelphia Museum of Art), in which a male rescuer clings to a woman's body as they are swung from a wrecked ship. But in other works, this confrontation could be pensive, disquieting in other ways. In some cases, his figures' gestures open up inscrutably intense relationships to their surroundings, whether the female bather twisting





sea water out of her clothing in *Eagle Head, Manchester, Massachusetts (high tide)* (1870; Metropolitan Museum) or the sailors in *Eight bells* (1886; Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover) shown quietly examining their navigation instruments.

The exhibition aimed to reconnect Homer's Caribbean works to the oceanic space of *Eight bells*, with which the painter is so closely associated. Here, lucid, brilliant watercolours formed the key record of the artist's encounter. They were also probably the least familiar works in the exhibition. The watercolours showed Homer moving at the margins of the spaces of white tourism, seemingly untouched by colonial control (although periodically marked by its flags and other emblems). Yet they are traversed by an uncertain energy – a kind of vacuum of narrative.

The fishermen in his *Nassau* (1899; Metropolitan Museum) are suspended in the quiet harbour, but what about the half-buried cannons strewn in the white sand? As Herdrich notes in her essay, overt figurations of turbulence are displaced onto natural forces, as in his *Hurricane, Bahamas* (Fig.18), in which palm trees – usually placid symbols of 'tropicality' – are blown by the wind into quietly explosive stars.

It is also in this liquid, often provisional medium that Homer worked out the choreography of *The Gulf Stream*. The painting was exhibited alongside a suite of



watercolours that study the sharks, the boat, the sugar cane hanging out of its hull, the man's pose, all in slightly different configurations. They suggest the uncertain syntax of Homer's intended narrative and how it might or might not finally cohere. Yet in *After the Hurricane, Bahamas* (1899; Art Institute of Chicago) this question seems answered by Homer's austere rendering of a Black man washed ashore, his body entwined with the splintered remnants of a boat. In another, *Sharks (the derelict)* (1885; Brooklyn Museum, New York), the man has disappeared altogether, leaving only the menacing sharks as they circle the dark void of the ship's listing hull, water cresting over the deck.

In the final sections of the exhibition, including works both preceding and following *The Gulf Stream*, the stoic endurance of Homer's Black sailor was posed against the various protagonists – human and otherwise – of Homer's later works, often made in the woods of the Adirondack Mountains or at Prouts Neck on the coast of Maine, where he lived from 1883. In these works, the dramatic gestures of his earlier scenes seep out from the human figure into the waves and winds of the oceanic world – a world in which the currents of the Gulf Stream are interwoven with the crashing waves roiled by a

Nor'easter in Maine. The exhibition suggested that we should not see the figures of these later paintings, such as *Winter coast* (1890; Philadelphia Museum of Art), as impossibly isolated in allegorical struggle. They too are part of history.

We are left, then, with the persistent undecidability of *The Gulf Stream*. The painting served here as a kind of refracting lens, gathering up the energies of Homer's extended thinking about oceanic space, violence and race, only to disperse it into new configurations. If the painting is meant to absorb these grave forces, it seems constantly to deflect them: whether in the face of the Black man, his gaze turned askance; or in the crystalline, opaque nature of its facture; or in the structure of the painting itself, where the all-over field formed by the churning waves terminates in the distant waterspout, propelling us out of the frame. Homer's claim that the figures in the painting (both the sharks and the Black man) were only of incidental interest to the real subject of the ocean seems like a wilful misdirection. Derek Walcott – a poet deeply interested in Homer's work – and many other writers on the Black Atlantic have articulated how the ocean itself is a grim repository of the histories that unfolded in its waters.<sup>8</sup> Seen here, Homer's painting seemed

19. *Snap the whip*, by Winslow Homer. 1872. Oil on canvas, 30.5 by 50.8 cm. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

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## Exhibitions

to register this in its own, partial way. That the burden of articulating the Atlantic's historicity in *The Gulf Stream* falls upon a Black figure is unsurprising – another rearticulation of the limits that are so often placed on the possibilities of Black life. Yet Homer's work suggests the ways that even narratives that appear concluded – wars that end, drownings that are avoided, children's games that disperse – are never quite so finished.

1 Allan Sekula's photographs and letter are reproduced in *idem*: 'Between the net and the deep blue sea (rethinking the traffic in photographs)', *October* 102 (2002), pp.3–34, at p.4.

2 Catalogue: *Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents*. By Stephanie L. Herdrich and Sylvia Yount. 200 pp. incl. 140 col. ills. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2022), \$50. ISBN 978-1-58839-747-8.

3 Catalogue: *Winslow Homer: Force of Nature*. By Christopher Riopelle, Christine Riding and Chiara Di Stefano. 128 pp. incl. 85 col. ills. (National Gallery, London, 2022), £18.99. ISBN 978-1-85709-687-3.

4 See S. Yount: 'Reconsidering Winslow Homer: methods and meanings'; and C. Riopelle: "'These works are real': Winslow Homer and Europe', in Herdrich and Yount, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.12–19 and 84–92.

5 The notable exception is D. Byrd: 'Trouble in paradise?: Winslow Homer in the Bahamas, Cuba, and Florida, 1884–1886', in *idem* and F.H. Goodyear III: exh. cat. *Winslow Homer and the Camera: Photography and the Art of Painting*, Brunswick ME (Bowdoin College Museum of Art) 2018, pp.103–40.

6 See B. Wolf: 'The labor of seeing: pragmatism, ideology, and gender in Winslow Homer's "The Morning Bell"', *Prospects* 17 (1992), pp.273–318.

7 See A. Arabindan-Kesson: *Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World*, Durham and London 2021, pp.141–48.

8 D. Walcott: 'The sea is history', in G. Maxwell, ed.: *The Poetry of Derek Walcott, 1948–2013*, New York 2014, pp.253–56. Walcott writes about his encounter with *The Gulf Stream* in his epic poem *Omeros* (1990).

**Modern Pre-Raphaelite Visionaries: British Art 1880–1930**  
Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum  
13th May–18th September

by ROSALIND WHITE

When the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) formed in 1848, they defined themselves in opposition to the mechanistic approach of those who imitated the classical compositions of Raphael and sought instead emancipation from the temporal trappings of aesthetic influence. With this origin in mind,



the choice of *Modern Pre-Raphaelite Visionaries* as an exhibition title seems purposefully paradoxical; boldly situated in the present, past and future, it wears its contradictions intentionally. As Tim Barringer writes in his contribution to the catalogue, 'to link the terms "Pre-Raphaelite" and "Modern" is an important provocation' (p.27).<sup>1</sup>

Mindful of this chronologically charged title, the curators, Alice Eden and Jane Simpkin, open with *The close of the day* by Frederick Cayley Robinson, a luminescent, liminal work that invites closer inspection (cat. no.1; Fig.20). Three women, gathered at twilight, are depicted in a temporally ambiguous way: romantic, lantern-sleeved dresses accompany hair parted with perfect symmetry in 1840s barley ringlets and over-the-ear braided loops. One has an antiquated folio opened at the table; another regards a distinctly modern music box playing Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words*. As an 1899 review in the *Daily Telegraph* put it, 'it is a curious fantasy [which is] at

once ultra-modern and archaic – partaking both of impressionism and of the pre-Raphaelitism of the Brotherhood'.<sup>2</sup> Nested within the frame is a hotchpotch of discordant detail, from the table set in the Arts and Crafts fashion and the new lustre of the freshly polished drawers in the foreground to the quasi-medieval triptych alluding to Christ's resurrection that is hung above two lit candles to suggest an altarpiece. Dated 1896, the year – Elizabeth Prettejohn reminds us in her catalogue essay – that saw the successive deaths of Frederic Leighton, President of the Royal Academy; John Everett Millais; and William Morris, the painting doubles as an 'elegy or farewell to those giants of the Victorian art world' (p.60).

Another introductory piece, Thomas Cooper Gotch's *Alleluia*, is similarly a curious compound of archaic and modern (1896; Tate; no.3). Although the choir of young girls stands beneath a Gothic inscription and holds aloft an illuminated manuscript they are captured

20. *The close of the day*, by Frederick Cayley Robinson. 1896. Oil on canvas, 120 by 135 cm. (Private collection; courtesy Rupert Maas; exh. Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum).