The Herring Net

1885

By Winslow Homer

Poster Packet

The Art Institute of Chicago Department of Museum Education Division of Student and Teacher Programs The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center

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Produced by the Department of Museum Education The Art Institute of Chicago

Robert W. Eskridge, Woman's Board Endowed Executive Director of Museum Education

Written by Cori Wulf Classroom Activities by Cori Wulf

Edited by Patricia Smith

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Winslow Homer (1836-1910) *The Herring Net*, 1885 Oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 48 3/8 in. Mr. And Mrs. Martin A. Ryerson Collection, 1937.1039 Winslow Homer is one of the most acclaimed American **realist** painters of the 19th century. His landscape and **genre** paintings are emblematic of post-Civil War America. Instead of concentrating on historic events of this tumultuous period, Homer chose to depict the natural environment that surrounded him and the ordinary, daily existence of American men and women. In *The Herring Net*, we catch a glimpse of two fishermen at work off the coast of Prout's Neck, Maine.

Winslow Homer was born on February 24, 1836, in Boston, Massachusetts. His father owned a hardware business and his mother was a watercolor painter who exposed Homer to art at an early age. Homer's family left Boston when he was six and moved to the countryside, where his love for nature began. Rather than stay inside and study, young Homer would run on the rolling fields and fish in nearby streams. After graduating from high school, he became an apprentice in a printing shop, and later worked as an illustrator for magazines. His early illustrations were mainly genre scenes, depicting the leisure and outdoor activities of high society in Boston and New York. However, in 1861, the magazine *Harper's Weekly* assigned Homer to cover the Civil War as a visual journalist. His realistic depictions of that war started his career as a painter.

Homer spent much of his early career living in New York City, where he moved in 1859. During his first two years there, he attended some art classes; however, too independent for the classroom, he was largely a self-taught artist. Homer's independent nature also motivated various travels, which influenced much of his work: he visited England, Canada, Cuba, the Bahamas, and Florida within his lifetime to find inspiration. Fascinated by the power of the sea, in the 1870s he often spent time in New England fishing villages. In 1881, Homer traveled to London, England. He quickly grew bored with the hectic urban lifestyle and made his way up England's coast, finally stopping in Cullercoats, a small fishing community near Tynemouth, a popular summer resort by the North Sea. The seaside environment provided a new direction for his artwork. Rather than continue to paint carefree scenes of summer tourists, he began painting the hardy fishermen, mysterious cloud series, fog, light effects on water, and the powerful waves of the sea. These new paintings were simple, honest, and majestic, possessing raw emotion and human drama.

After returning from Cullercoats in late 1882, Homer decided to leave his studio in New York and move to Prout's Neck, Maine, a favorite summer vacation spot for the Homer family. Friends and colleagues interpreted this move as a need for isolation; however, the real motivation was Homer's growing interest in the sea as a subject. Although Homer acquired a reputation of being a reclusive man, he came from a very close-knit family. Many family members spent the summer months at Prout's Neck: in fact, his older brother Charles purchased a large amount of land at Prout's Neck at this time, with the intention of developing the area into a summer resort. Beginning in 1884, Homer filled his winter months with trips to the Bahamas, Cuba, and Florida.

Homer did insist on privacy when he painted. Believing that painters should be inspired by first-hand experiences, he built his studio on a rocky cliff overlooking the ocean, where he

observed the daily tasks of fishermen and their battles with the sea. He enjoyed depicting the sea when it was the most dangerous in order to make a statement about man's continuous struggle with nature.

Not only did Winslow Homer love to depict water, he also enjoyed using it as a **medium** for his artwork. Although *The Herring Net* is an oil painting, Homer painted many of his seascapes in **watercolor**. Watercolor was referred to as the "traveler's medium," because it was easy to transport, dried quickly, and allowed artists to observe nature firsthand and finish a painting in one sitting. Homer would take along his watercolors on his various travels, and many of his watercolors served as color sketches for later oil paintings. His watercolors were loose and fresh, full of vibrant colors and intimacy. As these works were exhibited and published they also encouraged other artists to experiment with that medium. Although he believed that his greatest contributions were in watercolors, Homer saved his deepest thoughts about man's challenges with nature for oils.

The Herring Net is one such painting which depicts man's continuous struggle with nature. Winslow Homer once stated, "To paint nature, you must wait patiently for the wonderful effect. Then, you must be able to recognize it!"¹. In his seascape paintings, Homer would predetermine the desired lighting effects, then wait for days, weeks, or even months for nature to comply. In 1884, a large school of herring came to nearby Straton's Island, attracting a huge fishing fleet. Homer hired a boy to row him out to this fleet, and sketched the men and boats until nightfall. The Art Institute's painting is based on several sketches made at this time.

In *The Herring Net*, we see two anonymous fishermen, one young and one old, struggling with a large net of herring as their dory (small row boat) rocks unsteadily in the rough waves of the Atlantic Ocean. With their obscured facial features and large hats, the fishermen do not represent specific individuals, but rather, humanity in general and conflicts encountered in life. Unaware of the viewer, the figures are absorbed in their survival task. The relationship between these two men is significant on several levels. Homer chose to represent the life cycle by depicting one figure as younger, early in his life, and the other as an experienced older man, nearing the end of his life. The two figures also symbolize the dependence humans have on one another. This battle with the sea could not be won alone: the older man struggles to haul in the large net of fish, while the young boy creates a balance by perching precariously on the edge of the dory. Through these heroic efforts, both men demonstrate courage and strength. Homer also creates a sense of isolation in this painting: the small size of the boat in the vast sea gives an overwhelming feeling that these men are alone in their struggles. Four or five **schooners** loom on the distant horizon, intensifying this feeling of isolation.

The elemental conflict of man versus nature is emphasized by the contrasting patterns of light, colors, and lines. The sunlight peeking through the haze brings our attention to the pyramid shape formed by the two men, the boat, the diagonal of the net, and the sinking

¹ "Artist of the Outdoors," Scholastic Art, Dec.1992-Jan.1993, v.23 n.3, p.3.

wave in the lower left corner.² On the right, the red **buoy** in the water, the silver flesh of the fish, and the waves shimmer brightly in the sunlight. However, on the left, the waves and the two figures contrast the bright colors with mysterious, deep tones. Homer added further color contrast by creating a delicate background with soft brown and gray hues.

The same year Homer painted *The Herring Net*, he completed two other paintings, *The Fog Warning* and *Lost on the Grand Banks*, which also focused on fishermen in their small dories. In these works, Homer concentrated on the two other major fish found off the New England coast, halibut and cod. These paintings were exhibited together for the first time in 1893 at the World's Columbian exhibition in Chicago. As a body of work, Homer's paintings created a "noble epic," depicting the difficult, and sometimes tragic lifestyle of men at sea.³ Later in his life, Homer's fascination with the sea intensified so much that he eliminated the human subject in his paintings altogether, and focused solely on natural elements. He continued to paint at Prout's Neck for 25 years, until his death in 1910.

² Cikovsky, Nicolai. *Winslow Homer*. Washington DC: The National Gallery of Art, 1995, p. 227.

³ Cikovsky, Nicolai. *Winslow Homer*. Washington DC: The National Gallery of Art, 1995, p. 227.

GLOSSARY

buoy: A float, often having a bell or light, anchored in water as a warning of danger or as a marker for a channel.

genre: An artwork in which the subjects have to do with ordinary people engaged in everyday activities.

medium: A material used in artistic expression, such as oil paint, watercolor, etc. (pl. media)

realist: General term describing an intent to depict the appearance of the world. Also refers to a movement in nineteenth-century France that concentrated on the unidealized representation of as Realism's leader Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) said, "real and existing things."

schooners: any of various large fore-and-aft rigged sailing ships with three to seven masts.

watercolor: any paint bound with a medium soluble in water and, more specifically, paint that is not lightened by addition of white but thinned with water, producing effect of translucence or transparency of color.

OUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

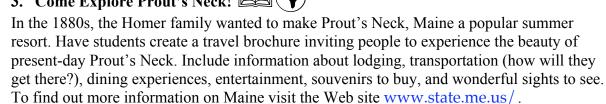


Use *The Herring Net* as a starting point for a unit on the weather. Have students read the weather report in the local newspaper. Pay close attention to the different things the forecast reports - precipitation, cloud coverage, temperature, and wind speed to name a few. After reading the report, have students write their own weather report at the day at sea based in The Herring Net. Ask students to read their weather reports aloud to one another. Then hold a discussion on how changes in the weather affect our emotions. Ask: How does rain or sunshine make you feel?

2. One Fish, Two Fish

Imagine that 250 people lived in Prout's Neck, Maine at the time Homer created The Herring Net. The two fishermen depicted in The Herring Net are responsible for feeding 1/5 of the total population. On average each person eats two fish per day. The net the fishermen use holds 20 fish. How many times will the fishermen have to dip their net into the water to catch enough fish to last 3 days?

3. Come Explore Prout's Neck!



4. Tell Me Your Story



Today most people go to large grocery stores to buy food. However, many years ago, people would go to open markets, small neighborhood stores, or would even grow and catch their own food to eat. Have students pretend to be newspaper reporters. Instruct students to talk to an older member of the community and interview them about how he or she obtained food in the past. Use the information to write a newspaper article comparing/contrasting the present with the past.

5. Man vs. Nature

Read The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemmingway (1899 - 1961). Compare/contrast the ideas that Hemmingway discusses through this novel with Homer's The Herring Net. How do both the novel and the painting discuss man's relationship with nature? How do they both address life cycles?

6. A Fish Tale



Oftentimes we only hear one point of view to a story. In The Herring Net we find several characters in the story. Instead of writing the story through the viewpoint of the two men, have students tell a tale from a fish's viewpoint. Instruct students to include information about what is going through the herrings' heads as they are caught up in the net (or maybe they made a narrow escape!), where they will end up next, and how they feel about the day's events.

7. The Traveller's Medium 😰

Winslow Homer enjoyed traveling and painted many of the sights he saw with watercolors. Have students experiment with watercolors in the classroom to learn about the fluid, watery quality of the paint. Distribute a white sheet of paper, watercolors, and a brush to each student. Have students brush water lightly onto one side of the paper. Next, have students dip their brush into a cup of water and then put a small amount of paint on the brush. Point out to students how the color runs and blends together on the wet paper. Have students use other colors to try mixing colors. On the dry half of the paper have students experiment with other brushstrokes, making both thin and thick lines. Once students feel comfortable with using watercolors, have students paint outside just as Winslow Homer did.

8. Here and There

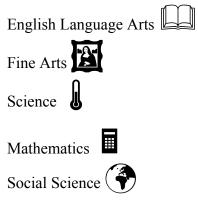


Although Illinois and Maine are both a part of the United States, they differ greatly. Start this activity by showing students the poster of *The Herring Net*. Ask students what they can tell you about the state of Maine just by looking at the poster. Next, have students research the state of Maine – its size, population, climate, topography, major resources, industries, tourist sites, state capital, and major cities. Then have students research the same areas for the state of Illinois. Finally, have students compare their findings. Have students record their findings in the chart on the next page.

	Illinois	Maine
Size		
Population		
Climate		
Topography		
Major resources		
Major industries		

Tourist sites	
State capital	
Major cities	

KEY:



These activities meets the following Illinois State Goals:

English]	Language Arts		
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State Goal 1: Reading with understanding and fluency.

State Goal 2: Understand explicit and implicit meaning in literature representing individual, community, national, world, and historical perspectives.

State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.

State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

State Goal 5: Use the language arts for inquiry and research to acquire, organize, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information.

Math

State Goal 6: Demonstrate and apply a knowledge and sense of numbers, including basic arithmetic operations, number patterns, ratios, and proportions.

Science

State Goal 12: Have a working knowledge of the fundamental concepts and principles of the life, physical and earth/space sciences, and their connections.





State Goal 17: Demonstrate a knowledge of world geography, as well as an understanding of the effects of geography on society, with an emphasis on the United States.

State Goal 18: Understand, analyze, and compare social systems, with an emphasis on the United States.



State Goal 25: Know the language of the arts.

State Goal 26: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced.

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