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Weather Beaten: Winslow Homer's Studio Restored

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Art

Weather Beaten: Winslow Homer's Studio Restored

By Philip Eliasoph, Senior Arts Editor

Celebrating the re-opening of Winslow Homer's studio at Prouts Neck, newly accessible, in an exclusive, private community with guarded, limited access.

Like a rugged sentinel protecting the storm-beaten coastline of American art, home at Prouts Neck beckons for our attention, a disquieting vault full of secrets, and a beacon of hope upholding the basics of great art.

In our current state of flux, with so much 'up for grabs' vis-à-vis questioning 'what is art?'—Homer mails it. His sturdy studio is an unassailable bastion. Bewildered and bemused by many of the antics of contemporary artistic experiments—I sensed felt Homer's magnetic effect anchoring me: Home!

On a recent pilgrimage out to a rocky promontory 12 miles south of Portland, Maine, one can't help but to think this metaphorically as one of the last standing lighthouses of class-

ical American painting. If location gives rise to artistic genius—then Prouts Neck (note: no apostrophe as by local lexicon) is Homer's transcendent legacy.

The austere, rather humble studio-cottage projects a powerful, pulsating beacon. Now, a century after Homer's lifetime (1836-1910) the public can take solace and inspiration from the views which transformed the history of art.

The flinty, crusty amalgam of an archetypal 'Old Man and the Sea' assumed his residence here from 1883 until his death.

Wandering visitors today are met with Homer-esque signs of intimidation: "Positively No Passing," and an unwelcoming police surveillance for those not "summering" as a verb. You'll look 'outta place' 'dude' without sporting Lacoste tennis whites, Lilly Pulitzer tango orange shirts, or NorthSail thermo-light parkas, not to each some attention of the private residents' association. But let's not quibble about the lauded gentry relinquishing a smidgen of their well-guarded privacy for gawking, spectators seeking out Homer's sanctuary.

Not even the most deserving art lover or tree-hugging naturalist gets to 'hang out' at Homer's refuge.

square with his baffling, reticent, bochelehood. His rugged women of the 1881-82 Cullercoats paintings from England's North Sea, are essentially Boston Patriot linebackers in husky stature with flowing garments tossed in the breeze. Think of Michelangelo's Sisyphs—masculine steroid types with female hormones. Homer's strangely anti-Victorian females are venerated as de-gendered, muscled bound body builders.

Then there is much fanciful lore in the literature about the dotting sister-in-law Mantic (wife of brother Charles), who humiliates the Homer legacy telling tales about heartbroken young shopgirls and local lassies who Winslow once courted, but inevitably rejected. For this skeptic, none of it adds up. And it appears that I am in good company addressing these theory questions.

The distinguished art historian Dr. Henry Adams of Case Western, authored a groundbreaking article in *The Burlington Magazine* (April, 1990) wondering out loud about Homer's "Mystery Woman." Intricately argued, a "shepherdess" might well have been a burly fellow. Sergeant Joseph Keenan, of the Belmont, Ma constabulary

lary who might have posed "in drag" according to Adams.

Professor Adams reclines Homer onto Dr. Freud's confessional couch. Pointing out Homer's "intense attachment to his mother, his ambivalent relationship with his weak and largely absent father, and the innumerable stories about his hostility towards women, all suggest deep-rooted sexual confusions." Christopher Reed published in the *Yale Art Bulletin* (Spring, 1989) zooms in Homer's "Otherness." We see the romance in Homer's muscular Black male victims as characterizing "erotic" tendencies.

Not known for drawing from the female nude model—in direct opposition to his counterpart—Thomas Eakins, Homer seems to have an aversion for feminine flesh. Learning about his wardrobe full of natty, hand-tailored three-piece suits from Brooks Brothers, makes a post-Stonewall art historian wonder. Not that Edwardian foppishness defines homosexuality, but it seems contradictory to Homer's lumberjack-deer hunter aura.

Jonathan Weinberg, currently Visiting Critic at the Yale School of Art, is widely regarded as the

Homer's own hand-painted, poisonous hex sign posted – "Snakes, Snakes, Mice!" Installed like a reliquary above the mantelpiece, its message was to deter the constant annoyances of inquisitive souvenir seekers at the height of his fame.

leading authority on gay iconography in American art. As a *VZU Magazine* exclusive, he spoke candidly to me about his ambivalence about the 'queering' of Homer and his reluctance to speculate about his sexuality when we know so little about his private life. "Certainly Homer at the end of his life made paintings of half-naked muscular young men that are homo-erotic," Dr. Weinberg notes. "But whether he wanted to be like these men, or fuck them – (or both), we cannot know."

I carefully scanned his bookshelf looking for E.M. Forster's three, pre-1910 novels of repressed sexuality as a clue. And more important in a thankfully post-DOMA era: who should care beyond simply coming to unravel a persistently cloaked persona who now merits more: unbiased disclosure. As one of the titans of American art, this taboo conversation will reveal more than a "don't ask, don't tell" indecisiveness.

Fortunately, one senses that elusive intimacy within a whisper of the master's ghostly presence. Homer's fingertips gazing at a window pane with a perfectly signed "Winslow," etched into the glass. It's akin to the fingerprints of Michelangelo recently discovered with the cleaning of the Sistine Ceiling.

Like kindred spirits, fellow giants of American art, Homer's studio residence enshrines his career. One quickly thinks of Frederic E. Church's Olana with its commanding views of the Hudson, or the Jackson Pollock-Lee Kraemer paint plattered studio in Amagansett, Long Island on our bucket list. The Portland Museum of Art earns angels wings for restoring this crown jewel back to its original, understated glory. Like the old Anglo-philic Piero della Francesca trail winding its way through a string of chapels ensconced in fairytale Tuscan hilltowns, Prouts Neck, is an instant 'must see' landmark.

"The opening of the Winslow Homer studio is a pivotal moment in American art history. For the first time, visitors are able to experience



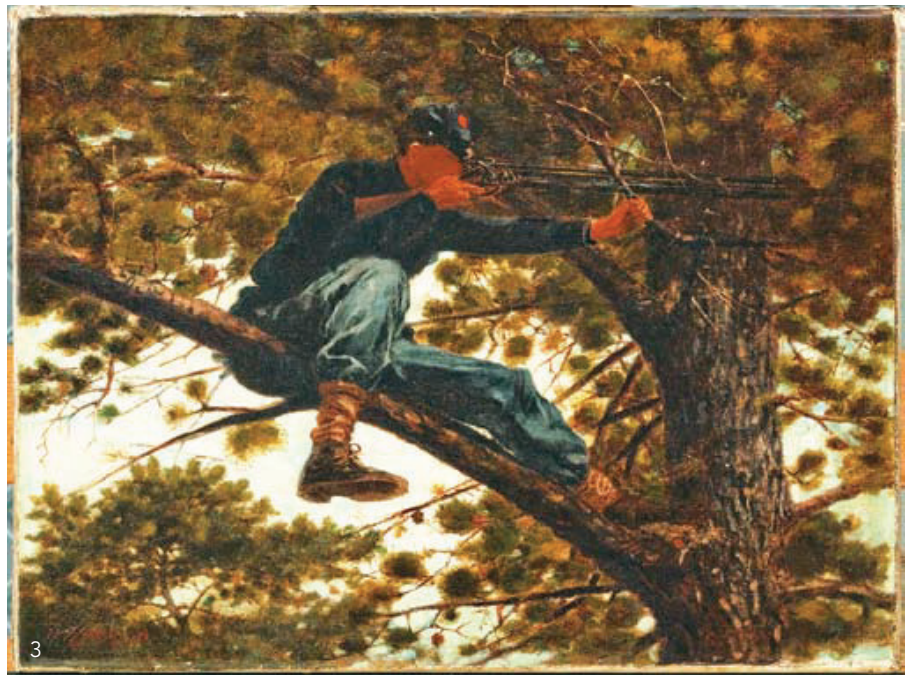
Photographs courtesy of Portland Museum of Art



GHOSTLY PRESENCE Above, akin to the fingerprints of Michelangelo recently discovered with the cleaning of the Sistine Ceiling—a window pane with a perfectly signed "Winslow," is etched into the glass.



Unknown Artist. Photograph: Winslow Homer with *The Gulf Stream* in his studio at Prout's Neck, Maine, circa 1900. Albumen print. 4 11/16 x 6 3/4 inches. Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, Gift of the Homer Family.



the Studio as it was during Homer’s time and discover the actual location where he created his best-known paintings,” notes PMA Director Mark H.C. Bessire. “The studio is truly a cultural treasure.”

This was not achieved without the combined intelligence and flat out moxie to mount a \$10.8 million national campaign. Engaging leading architects, art historians, and skilled craftspersons, the studio bears enough authenticity to grasp Homer’s vantage points for several pivotal paintings. Most thrilling is a gentle, overgrown winding pathway down to the craggy, weatherbeaten spit of rocks.

This geological vestige of the last glacial ice age circa 40,000 years ago left its slashed out sculpture for Homer to memorialize in watercolor and oils. Its iconography was first known to me as a 10 year old schoolboy gazing at Homer’s majestic Prouts Neck paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The awesome power of “Northeaster” (1896) with its Japanese/Impressionist “Ukiyo-e” like plume of foaming waves, has been indelibly stamped. Thanks to the good folks at the Portland Museum of Art – that transcendent image sprang to

life. A lifelong notion in my minds’ eye was the terra firma I was now magically standing upon.

For next season’s fortunate visitors, they too will be rewarded as they embrace this most secret destination. Here, you will come to experience the physical sensations, blinding sunlight, wild flowers, and tortured rocky coast forming the inimitable language of Homer’s visual poetics. □

1. Winslow Homer (United States, b.1836, d.1910) *Weatherbeaten*, 1894, Oil on canvas, 28 1/2" x 48 3/8" Bequest of Charles Shipman Payson.

2. Peter Juley. Photograph: Last official portrait of Homer, 1908. Photograph, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine, Gift of the Homer Family.

3. Winslow Homer, *Sharpshooter*, 1863 Oil on canvas, 12 1/4" x 16 1/2" Gift of Barbro and Bernard Osher.

Hurry – It’s not too early to make your reservations, as last summer’s limited access sold out quickly. Open between April-December. For advanced reservations and instructions: call the Portland Museum of Art – (207) 775-6148. Tickets are \$55/\$30 for members. Tour duration: about 2.5 hours, transported by private van into the site. Please visit: www.portlandmuseum.org.

Photographs courtesy of Portland Museum of Art