

Reviews as of 5 April 2022

**Winslow Homer: American Passage**

**Author:** William R. Cross

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**Vivid storytelling melds with exuberant analysis in this sweeping look at a canonical American artist's vibrant life.** Art curator Cross (*Homer at the Beach*) delves into the world of Winslow Homer (1836–1910), a painter whose “search for balance, order, and beauty amid the conflicts he confronted,” Cross argues, imbued him with a canny ability to capture both the experiences of “ordinary people” and “powerful forces of nature.” Drawing from letters, diaries of friends, and published interviews, Cross follows Homer’s artistic quest – from his early commercial pictorial wood print drawings in the mid-1850s to the solemn portraits he published in *Harper’s Weekly* during the Civil War, to the vivid rendering of natural landscapes that became synonymous with his name. Cross draws insightful connections between Homer’s life events and his works – citing, in one example, his “mother’s declining health” as being responsible for the “mortal themes” present in such famous works as his “American masterpiece,” *The Life Line* (1884). No stone in Homer’s life is left unturned nor brushstroke of deliberately placed light left unexplored under Cross’s meticulous eye. While occasionally dense, the rich descriptions and reproductions of Homer’s art will beckon readers along. Art connoisseurs will want to make room on their shelves for this definitive guide to a great American artist.

- *Publishers Weekly*, 11 February 2022

Artist Winslow Homer (1836–1910), who hailed from a large Boston merchant family, was “intensely private,” leaving his paintings to speak for themselves. But in spite of their seemingly straightforward subjects – landscapes, seascapes, people at work – Homer’s resplendent, kinetic, boldly innovative oils and watercolors are more implicit than explicit, set at a slant, as his contemporary Emily Dickinson would say, while they also “contain multitudes,” to quote the poet Homer was most often compared to, Walt Whitman. This low-key radical was overdue for a thorough, historically anchored reconsideration, which Cross provides with skill, insight, and precision. Homer initially

earned renown as a talented newspaper illustrator when he chronicled the Civil War, focusing on soldiers, not generals, and African Americans. Homer felt abiding empathy and respect for those who were oppressed – the enslaved, all people of color, women, the working class – portraying them as “figures of strength and authority.” Cross reveals how Homer’s radiant and dramatic paintings are also shaped by profound questions about humankind’s place in the glory of nature. As Cross chronicles Homer’s sojourns in New York, England, the Caribbean, the Adirondacks, and Maine, he provides deep readings of Homer’s ever-evolving, daring works and tracks their often-insensitive reception. **With plentiful color reproductions, Cross’s meticulous, vivid, and revelatory biography transforms our appreciation for this quietly steadfast and subtly trailblazing artist.**

– Donna Seaman, *Booklist*, Starred Review, 15 April 2022

A rich biography of the towering artist who captured the realities of 19th-century America.

Drawing on abundant scholarship and archival sources, Cross chronicles in vibrant detail the career, travels, friendships, and prolific output of Winslow Homer (1836-1910). With no diaries and few letters available to document much of his subject’s life, Cross speculates about what the artist “may have” or “appears to have” done or felt. But the author is so deeply cognizant of 19th-century art, history, and material culture that his inferences are thoroughly persuasive. Growing up in Boston, Homer was encouraged by his mother, an artist herself. As a young man, Homer worked for a prominent Boston lithographer, soon contributing wood engravings to illustrated magazines, notably *Harper’s Weekly*, which became his principal client. During the Civil War, he made several stays at the front, sketching scenes of camp life for *Harper’s*. The successful illustrator, though, aspired to be recognized as a painter. Moving from Boston to New York in 1859, Homer began to submit his work to group exhibitions. In 1866, he sailed for Europe, where he visited museums and galleries – Cross recounts the works he would have seen – and although no drawings survive from that trip, he brought back many pastoral scenes that he painted in the French countryside. By the time he returned 10 months later, Cross notes, “he returned to America penniless,” intent on marketing his work to wealthy buyers. The oils and watercolors that Homer produced for the next decades of his life, as he grew increasingly famous, reflect the landscapes in which he thrived: the White Mountains, Jersey shore, Caribbean, Adirondacks, and Prouts Neck, Maine, where his family had bought property. His

subjects often were ordinary men and women – including those newly freed from slavery – engaged in work or pleasure. This deeply contextualized portrait features more than 400 images, including maps drawn specifically for this volume.

**Gracefully written, empathetic, and authoritative.**

– *Kirkus Reviews*, Starred Review, 1 May 2022

