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'Kissing the Moon': Winslow Homer's Mortal Men at Sea

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By *John Wilmerding*

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'Kissing the Moon' (1904), by Winslow Homer. PHOTO: ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART, PHILLIPS ACADEMY

'Kissing the Moon': Winslow Homer's Mortal Men at Sea; Painted in the later years of the artist's life, this 1904 work is an enigmatic scene set on the open ocean that is both immediate and cosmic.

Winslow Homer (1836-1910) is widely considered to be America's greatest landscape painter, and "Kissing the Moon" (1904) is one of the most powerful yet enigmatic works from his last years. There are at least three questions we need to address to get at its content: Where is this set, what are the figures doing or not doing, and who are they?

The scene seems simple enough: three men in a large, open ocean-going dory, far offshore. They are not in a fishing-boat cabin but exposed to an empty expanse of rolling waves at sea. They did not row out from shore, and the mother vessel is not in view. Their boat has slipped into a trough between waves, so the horizon is not visible. Only the crest of the wave at right reaches up to overlap with the distant full moon, rising or setting we do not know. Hence, the picture's title.

The man in the stern is dressed for bird hunting, the other two are fishermen. Yet there is no sign of a gun or fishing net, only a partial glimpse of an oar. They are drifting, almost immobilized, each person looking at a different section of water, as if hoping for an appearance of marine life.

The themes of this pivotal work are stated more explicitly in some of Homer's related paintings of the period, for example "The Herring Net" (1885) and "The Fog Warning" (1885), each with its display of the catch. We feel the gravity of the labor in the first and the prospect of not making it home in the latter. Man's isolation in nature, often threatened by larger forces, is the case in "Lost on the Grand Banks" (1885), with its impending obscurity of fog, and the looming waterspout in "The Gulf Stream" (1899).

"Eight Bells" (1886) depicts two fishermen attempting to determine their place at sea, while "Right and Left" (1909) gives us the hunters, now in the background, firing at ducks near us. As he approached his last years, Homer increasingly felt a sense of mortality, and this is reflected in his work.

The turn of the century was an uneasy time for the country. Immigration and urban growth were on the rise, banking failures and assassinations were unsettling. Everything seemed in motion or destabilized. This was the era of development in the cinema, the automobile, the airplane, an understanding of magnetism, and the pronouncement of the theory of relativity. Nothing was certain.

Ever since 1876 when he completed "Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)," Homer realized that

placing a central vessel on the diagonal lent a particular energy to his design. We see this in well-known examples like "The Fog Warning" and "The Gulf Stream." His diagonals in "Kissing the Moon"—the striations of clouds and the angled lines of waves—lend a dynamism if not motion to the composition. A curious inertia saturates the arrangement, heightening the tension with its diagonal rhythms.

Who are the painting's figures? Clearly real people sat for the artist. Philip Beam was the first art historian to observe that the man facing us was identifiable: He was in fact one of the artist's favorite relatives, his nephew, Arthur Patch Homer.

Emily Homer, a collateral descendent of the artist, has confirmed that her family believes from old photographs this face to be the nephew's. The assertion is worth noting since the most recent biography published on Homer, by William Cross, suggests a different identification. He asserts the figure is a native Ilnu Indian who often went fishing with Homer and is seen in watercolors of the 1890s.

The family identity makes more sense. The painting is an unusual amalgam of seascape, genre and portraiture. Could this not be a metaphoric group portrait, with the two anonymous individuals whose heads are turned away being Winslow in the middle and his older brother Charles in the bow?

In such a scenario the artist would be representing the three branches of his family, not surprisingly situating himself in the central location. He wears a black sou'wester hat, a favored possession when he went to the shore or out to sea.

We see that dark sou'wester a final time in Homer's last painting in 1909. Titled "Driftwood," it has what many believe to be the painter, again seen from behind, down at the shore's edge. He is blocked literally and metaphorically from getting to the water and his signature subject matter by a large tree trunk that has fallen across the entire foreground. He won't be able to paint again.

In "Kissing the Moon," Homer takes us from the specific and here-and-now to the cosmic and universal, and from realism to the edge of abstraction. It is a paradox of illusory spatial compression that the moon, some quarter of a million miles distant, should come to rest seemingly a few feet away. Homer's image is a haunting mixture that reveals and conceals in equal measure.

Mr. Wilmerding has written extensively about Homer, most recently the introduction to the exhibition catalog "Homer at the Beach: A Painter's Journey 1869-1880" (Cape Ann Museum).

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