Lookout Beyond!: Winslow Homer and the Gilded Age

BY THAI MATTHEWS

Winslow Homer’s extraordinary work *The Lookout-All is Well* presents perfectly the dark duality of the American ‘Gilded Age’. Amidst a time of parlor art and portraitists, quick fortunes and “progress,” Homer reaches into the heart of America and plucks out the victims of that age’s modernity. A painter during the Civil War, Homer’s experiences capturing both the horror and the heroism of that period imbues his work with a sense of emergency, foreboding, and wisdom that is nowhere better showcased than in *The Lookout*.¹ All of this, and still hope remains. It is apparent in the very title; *All is Well*. As the United States moved from its gruesome Civil War through its turbulent Reconstruction toward the technologic, thoroughly modern, progress obsessed Gilded Age, Homer’s art served as a touchstone connecting all of these eras and placing them before the eyes of the people. As ‘the lookout’ himself sails on a stormy sea into an uncertain future, so too does the nation of Winslow Homer journey into an era of uncertainty where there is both hope and fear regarding the years ahead.

Winslow Homer was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1836, and was raised in nearby Cambridge. There, he was introduced to the arts from an early age via the tutelage of his mother Henrietta, who was an accomplished watercolorist in her own right. Homer was apprenticed to a lithographer in his adolescence and there honed the artistic skills that would

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win him a job at the magazine *Harper’s Weekly*. In 1861, Homer was promoted from un-credited template artist at *Harper’s Weekly* to “artist correspondent,” freeing him to document the coming of age of a nation at the dawn of the Civil War. The young artist, then only twenty five, was sent to the Virginia home front for the purposes of capturing scenes from the conflict. At first “anecdotal” in nature, Homer’s images slowly changed.\(^2\)

Homer did more than merely depict the war. He took responsibility for it by crafting “images [that] gave the American public a visual sense of the war”\(^3\) as it was truly experienced by thousands of young men on the front. No scenes of epic battle or gloriously gory violence would escape from Homer’s brush. Homer’s work instead grounded itself in realism by capturing both the fighting and the stretches of empty time between, demonstrating the lives of the men who had made death their constant companion and capturing the endless cycle of casual tragedy in works like *The Army of the Potomac-A Sharpshooter on Picket Duty*. “I always had a horror of that branch of service” wrote Homer after the war’s conclusion\(^4\). His horror is quickly apparent in the tension of the set of the featureless soldier’s shoulders, the thinness of the branch upon which the young man perches which itself threatens every minute to bend and finally break beneath the pressure. The soldier’s surroundings are hazy, the somber blue of his Union uniform sharply distinctive against the identical green leaves and oddly colorless sky. Homer’s gift for metaphor is what translates most clearly throughout the body of his work. It is


the combination of proverb and picture that makes individual paintings like *The Lookout-All is Well* valuable as both historical artifacts and social commentary meant to critique the then-present and speculate on what would become the world of the future.

The intensity of Winslow Homer’s Civil War period makes itself apparent in his work forever afterwards, a legacy of gritty and enigmatic realism made evident in the heavy, bold brushstrokes and bright color choices that leap from Homer’s later canvasses. It is in *Army of the Potomac* that Homer transitions forever into the medium of watercolor\(^5\), a choice he would maintain until his death in 1910. By the close of the national struggle, Homer’s art had come to reflect the desolation catalyzed by all the violence. This experience would become the foundation of his work’s distinction because by serving as an artist correspondent Homer spent four foundational years producing art that was simultaneously a means of understanding current events, a means of communicating to the public his private thoughts on nationally shared woes and wonderments.

Homer’s time at the battlefront firmly grounded his later art in realistic portrayals of the lives lived by common men. It would set him apart from other artists of the Gilded Age; ex-patriots and portraitists responsible for documenting the lives and gospels of the nation’s newly minted high society. Though the aesthetics of Homer’s art aim to please, his knack for subtle social criticism awakens in his audience a restless unease. It stirs in each viewer a desire for answers after Homer’s work has posed several very specific questions about what life after the

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Civil War and amidst the booming economic climate of the Gilded Age could mean for a population undergoing rapid technological and vast social changes.

After four years of a thoroughly ‘American’ struggle, the United States at the close of the Civil War began turning its gaze outwards “growing past provincialism”6 and looking towards Europe to set the example of the new age. This fascination with Europe and its old-world outlook permeated the new social norms of the United States’ new aristocracy as exemplified in everything from the fashions to the literature of the Gilded Age period. Art and the collection of it fared no differently, for “Mimicking European ideals of aristocracy and culture: Americans began collecting works by European masters and commissioning European Renaissance subjects and styles”7. In the midst of this quest to imitate Europe it becomes important to note the staunchly domestic stance of Homer’s work. Though he traveled in 1867 to France, he remained for only one year which he spent studying not on the picturesque landscapes, historical monuments, or famous socialites of his new surroundings, but rather the daily life of French peasants.

The 1870s found Homer returned to the United States and concentrating on scenes of idealized pastoral tranquility. When Homer took up the idealists’ brush to paint such scenes of rural grace as Snap the Whip, he captured the nostalgia of a nation still mourning the loss of its former pre-war identity. Henry James, fixture of American high society and fixated Europhile, criticized Homer’s work in the mid 1870s for being too accessible to the American public saying,

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7 Ibid.
“We frankly confess that we detest his subjects...he has chosen the least pictorial range of scenery and civilization; he has resolutely treated them as if they were pictorial...and, to reward his audacity, he has incontestably succeeded.” The temerity of Homer’s unabashed use of the bucolic is best understood in the context of his contemporaries, among the most famous of whom was painter and late sculptor John Singer Sargent.

John Singer Sargent made his fame as a portraitist, though his body of work includes many landscapes and watercolors. Sargent was born abroad to American parents in Italy, where he studied art in addition to continuing the same in Germany and Paris, France. The differing backgrounds of Sargent and Homer foreshadow the marked differences in their styles and subjects. Where the bulk of Sargent’s commissions for portraits stemmed from millionaires, billionaires, critically acclaimed authors, other prominent visual artists, and minor royals, Homer’s work found its niche either depicting common people doing common things or entirely absent from scenes of nature where only the effect of mankind’s presence is left to be contemplated alongside the measureless grandeur of the natural world. For example, *The Rapids, Hudson River, Adirondacks*, painted in 1894, is a watercolor that specifies how in the world of industrial logging the absence of man can be a presence.

On first encounter, this watercolor is peaceful and intimate, a virtuoso study of the movement of the river’s surface over partially submerged rocks. Long, painterly strokes of black watercolor over layers of blue describe the depth and speed of the water, while areas of bright white paper have been revealed by scraping to indicate the bubbling froth of whitewater rapids. It is only along the far bank that one becomes aware of the presence of man in this tranquil landscape, implied by the clean-cut logs lying haphazardly along the rocky bank.

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Even more subtle is Homer’s suggestion of a fisherman’s presence, indicated by the leaping fish at river’s edge, where the artist used his knife blade to sketch the serpentine motion of a fishing line in mid-cast. The fisherman is invisible, yet we are made to understand that the presence of human beings alters nature profoundly.

In direct contrast, the commissioned portraits that made Sargent prominent are often studies of power.

Some of Sargent’s most famous portraits showcase the wives of great businessmen and nobles, their children and their homes and their wealth all on colorful display on canvasses as massive as 7.3 feet by 7.3 feet (The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit; 1882). Though these paintings offer compelling psychological portrayals of privilege and power, uncovering the dark elements, in the case of The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit, of grand-bourgeois childhoods, they do not portray working-class or middle-class American life that Homer felt compelled to represent. Sargent’s works express the results of Gilded Age innovation without necessarily ruminating on the origins of the extraordinary wealth of most of his patrons, or on the effects maintaining such a lifestyle could have on the populace and the physical environment that make it possible.

Sargent’s most famous portraits aren’t merely artworks; they are statements of personal might. Might forged by steel and proved by iron, a kind of personal privilege only made possible by the big business commerce shaping the United States after Reconstruction. Sargent’s works testify to the possibilities of the Gilded Age, but they do not ponder the hazards with the same straightforward style of Homer’s works where individuals are rarely the focus of the  

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painting and never the all consuming point. Homer situates his human figures (when these figures are present at all) amid a world rife with details whose implications all signify contemporary events with the power to prompt philosophical contemplation. *The Lookout-All is Well*, for example places a man in the bigger picture but not at its center. His are not the dazzling colors of the sky, not the vividly energized texture of the turbulent sea. A bell takes central focus. A storm asserts its’ visual (and hence, emotional) dominance. Man is but part of the story, a facet of this new world and not its foundation, far from its driving force. From the ashes of the Civil War a globalized struggle has arisen: men against the elements, the manufactured world against the natural, a people with limited control in a new, unstable world—a ship lost at sea.

In contrast, Sargent’s famed and highly fashionable portraits do not ask their viewers to identify with a larger, greater whole because the focal point of any portrait is, naturally, a person. Each person is a symbol be it of their family, their status, their income, or all three. Sargent’s portraits are strictly for the parlor, by nature exclusive because they hang in homes out of reach for the poor and the non-Caucasian. They hearken to European sensibilities in the fact that they exist at all, European nobles having long cast their images in art for the sake of attesting their own importance, their own legitimacy. Sargent’s choice to portray elite figures and ignore entire segments of the national population echoes a hesitance on the part of high society to speculate on the weaknesses of a society fabricated in urban factories on the bones of an ex-agricultural society.
In direct contrast, Winslow Homer lingers in the world outside privileged drawing rooms. When he captures the new nation in times of relaxation on the New Jersey shore (Long Branch, New Jersey; 1869) or the natural beauty of the Hudson River Valley (The Rapids, Hudson River, Adirondacks; 1894), he is actively searching for a peace that might make sense of the past warfare and hunting for where exactly the new United States stands. Winslow Homer’s art is an investigation of the period after the Civil War, an exploration of its significance and consequences both for veterans of the turbulent past and the children to whom those veterans hope to give a bright future.

The Lookout—All is Well is a painting meant for close, intimate, viewing. The parameters of this particular Winslow work are very small, cut off to include only the elements that will make this allegory clear. There is man, a lone figure aboard a great mechanical vessel both pitted against and dependent upon the wiles of the natural world. He stands beckoning to a crew invisible to the viewer, drawing the viewer into the world of the artwork by placing them in the role of the crew. With his level gaze cast in partial shadow, it is impossible to know whether the lookout fears some natural evil up ahead or simply gestures to his comrades to some other purpose. What matters is the feeling that at once strikes the viewers: that they and this lookout share the same fate. They are in the same boat, so to speak—all unified in their circumstances, all along on the same voyage despite differences of class, race, or gender because these differences will not stop the country from industrializing and consequently the diverse populace from all being affected by the results of such a revolutionizing of the national identity.
This is true because the art of the Gilded Age has been likened to an “American Renaissance.”\textsuperscript{10} an age when the rich became patrons of art and science and saw it as their duty to make the joys made available by faster, cheaper, mass production accessible to the working classes and a time when “A spirit of noblesse pervaded the families of certain entrepreneurs.”\textsuperscript{11} According to Sean Cashman, these “families . . . came to believe it was their moral duty to found such cultural institutions as museums, libraries, and opera houses.”\textsuperscript{12} This “noblesse” would proceed to have a profound effect on every division of society including racial minorities and the economic majority of what Marx termed ‘proletariats’ in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Examples include the significant donations made by John D. Rockefeller to the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary, a college founded exclusively for young African-American women that showed promise in the liberal arts. So indebted was the Seminary to this famous captain of industry that founders Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles renamed the school Spelman College in honor of Rockefeller’s wife and parents who were known for their abolitionist pre-war views.\textsuperscript{13} Similar philanthropy found Andrew Carnegie attesting in his 1900 book \textit{The Gospel of Wealth} that “those with great wealth must be socially responsible and use their assets to help others”\textsuperscript{14} and later in 1901, approximately five million dollars to the New York Public Library.


\textsuperscript{12} Sean Dennis Cashman, \textit{America in the Gilded Age}.


Libraries such as that in New York and museums all over the country were made free to the public, effectively removing barriers between the rich and the poor where art like Homer Winslow’s was concerned. Colleges like Spelman were made accessible to the African-American descendants of the formerly enslaved, effectively increasing the social capital of the racial minority and placing their post war interests in the minds of the wealthy and powerful. The patronage of men like Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller placed all who could not share their prestige on the equal footing of owing something to it. Winslow Homer, himself a patronized artist throughout much of his career, focuses on that equalization of the lower classes and makes that an essential theme of *The Lookout*. His painted lookout invites all of mankind despite their varying backgrounds to step to the helm, to master their own destinies, to take a look at the world that lies before them, and have a hand in setting the nation’s new course.

It is the dark cast of the work, the thunderous browns and blacks—all somber in their implications—which offers a more complex reading of *Lookout*. The muted palette works in conjunction with the placement of the painting’s sole human being (to the lower left, literally painted into a corner with his mouth flung wide in a silent scream) to create a sensation of panic. There are only aspects of the work that could be labeled bright; those two shining stars above the ship and then bell just over the lookout’s head. It is the bell that comes to be the focus of the viewer’s eye. It sits directly in the middle of the painting, soaking up what little light lingers in the sky and caught mid-toll for some unknown cause. That bell, for an American caught in the rush of the Gilded Age, symbolizes many things.
That bell is a call to action. It is a charge for every able citizen to take up the pioneering spirit, the inventing, toiling, enterprising American spirit and at once manifest their joint destiny by literally taking the wheel of the technologies made available to them, here represented by the great ship upon which the lookout of the painting’s title sails. It would be a good thing, if the defining an ‘able’ citizen in a time of sharp social class divisions, racial oppression, and gender based repression were a feat more easily accomplished. That bell hearkens back to the Liberty Bell, a quintessentially “American” relic of the nation’s own unique past and roots in revolution, a fierce (and often dark) legacy to uphold. It would be a benevolent omen if the bell and all its historical significations didn’t hang so directly over that lookout’s head, so imposing as it swings to and fro.

This clamorous bell simultaneously hearkens back to all machines. It stands for the industrial age, leading men even as it supplants man’s place in the eye of general public (who are here the viewers of the painting). The human lookout is not the center of this painting, the center of the viewer’s focus. The bell dominates the painting, a fact that is accented by the finger of the lookout, who with his finger directs the attention of the viewer back towards the bell, back towards the intertwined threat and promise of its brilliance, of its grand proportions and its multilayered implications.

The bell is the heart of the painting’s ambiguity, the reason that the work can be read as either a sign of a fortuitous future for the nation or a warning of trouble just ahead. Should men be so entranced by machinery? Could it save them from some nontechnical disaster like a storm upon the sea? Where is God and has He left mankind to (literally) their own devices? While the
bell takes up the center of the canvas, the billowing two-toned sky behind it hints to a greater force, a presence beyond that of either man or his machines. With that one detail, Winslow constructs a world beyond the ship, beyond the realm of man’s control and so asks his viewers to broaden their scope and see beyond their machines (the bell), their nation (its history and their ties to it, represented by the ship), even their own selves (the lookout), and contemplate for a moment the idea of something bigger than any and all individuals.

This painting is about choice. It highlights the viewer’s ability to decide upon what it is they’re seeing; what it is they would like to see as their future. They may choose between a tempestuous or a benevolent sea. They may choose to find comfort in the idea of ‘the beyond’ or they may fear its great and shadowy ambiguity. Winslow does not tell his viewers what to see, does not instruct their consequent feelings. He only distills two sides of a complex argument; to love or to fear the Gilded Age? To respect or to repulse it? To remember what was lost in the wake of civil strife or surge beyond, forsaking personal memory for hopes of a national greatness in this new world if infinite industrial potential?

Homer Winslow translates the period’s many contradictions—unfathomable wealth alongside incredible poverty, a young America obsessed with creating an image on par with old Europe, peace after wartime—into a series of symbols that in themselves contain contradictions. How one interprets the painting directly corresponds to how one interprets the Gilded Age; whether it is to be correctly termed “The Brown Decades” or deemed “The Heroic Age of
American Enterprise.” Winslow Homer’s *The Lookout-All is Well* offers no one, clear answer.

That is not its purpose. Its purpose, like the age that spawned it, remains solely to spark questions in the minds of those who look upon it. That is why it remains powerful almost 120 years after its debut.

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