

Winslow Homer was a New Englander by birth and long ancestry. About 1636, Captain John Homer, an Englishman living in the west of England and active in maritime shipping, immigrated to America. He settled in Massachusetts where, almost two centuries later, his descendant Winslow Homer was born in Boston on February 24th 1836. Winslow grew up in the nearby village of Cambridge, a short walk from Harvard University. His mother was, like his father, of old New England Yankee stock, and he undoubtedly inherited her artistic talent. She was a skilful amateur watercolorist. She encouraged him when as a child he showed an aptitude for drawing.

At about the age of eighteen, Homer became apprenticed to a Boston lithographer, John H. Bufford, in whose shop he was trained to copy other people's drawings onto printing stones. He soon grew tired of this and at age twenty-one set himself up as a freelance illustrator. Much of his work was published in the newly popular pictorial weeklies including *Harper's Weekly*, one of the most popular magazines of the day. Homer's subjects in these illustrations were nearly always the life he observed around him in city and country. He drew his illustrations on wood blocks which were then engraved by others, following the usual practice of the time.

In 1859 he moved from Boston to New York to be closer to the *Harper's* office and also because he was now determined to become a painter. New York was the centre of the American art world. He took a few lessons at the National Academy but soon discontinued them, apparently finding them of little value. At the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, Homer began to report scenes of military life. He went to the war front in Virginia for a period in 1862 and from this experience came his earliest paintings.

In 1866 he made the first of his two trips abroad, spending ten months in France. During this time he painted in Paris and its environs. Two of his paintings of the American Civil War were on exhibition in the art section of the Exposition Universelle in 1867. After his stay in Paris he returned to New York where, in 1873, he began painting in watercolor as well as oil. Within a decade he had become the great American master of the medium. He ceased working as a popular illustrator in the mid-1870's. By that time he was widely regarded as one of the most able and original American artists of his generation. His work was always well received by critics but it sold only moderately well.

As a person Homer was reserved and taciturn. With the passage of years, he cared less for city life and its social involvements. Always independent, from mid-life onward he increasingly sought a more isolated existence. He never married.

**In the spring of 1881, at age forty-five, Homer made his second voyage abroad. He settled in the fishing village of Cullercoats on the North East coast of England where he stayed for eighteen months. He made numerous drawings, many watercolors, and a few oils. He took as his subjects the sea, the coast, the fishing boats, and, most of all, the fishwives who worked in and around the village while their men were away at sea. One of his Cullercoats works, the oil painting, *Hark! The Lark!*, was included in the summer exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1882.**

**On his return to America late in 1882, he closed his New York studio and moved to Prout's Neck on the coast of Maine, a rock-bound peninsular a few miles south of the city of Portland. Prout's Neck was inhabited for most of the year mainly by local fishermen and their families, and in many ways it was a place similar to Cullercoats. In July and August, well-to-do summer residents, including Homer's parents, brothers, and sisters-in-law, swelled the population. For the rest of his life Homer resided in a studio-cottage overlooking the sea. He painted many of his major oils there between 1884 and 1910, the year of his death.**

**Beginning in the mid-1880's Homer escaped the rigorous Prout's Neck winters by fishing and painting in such warmer and sunnier sub-tropical places as Cuba, the Bahamas, and Florida. From these visits came a series of brilliant watercolors. They were rivalled only by those he executed in the Adirondacks during his summer fishing trips to that region of Northern New York State in the late 1880's and 1890's. His reputation as a major American master rose steadily throughout these years. His paintings sold reasonably well, though without the high prices earned by such international favourites as John Singer Sargent. In his later years, after about 1900, Homer was generally regarded as the foremost living American painter.**

**He died in his studio-cottage at Prout's Neck on 29 September 1910 at age 74.**