



1st Grade: MAY

The Country School

Winslow Homer

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About the Artist

The following information is provided to give classroom teachers a comprehensive understanding of the artist and artwork. Use your judgment on what to share with your students based on their level of curiosity, observation/inquiry skills, comprehension and age-appropriateness.

Winslow Homer

Winslow Homer was born on February 24, 1836, in Boston, Massachusetts. His childhood home was in nearby Cambridge. Homer began studying art at an early age and was fortunate to have several mentors. As a young boy, he received art lessons from his mother, Henrietta Benson Winslow, who was an accomplished watercolorist. In his early twenties, Homer served as an apprentice to the nationally known lithographer, John H. Bufford. These learning experiences led Homer to become a freelance illustrator for well-known publications *Harper's Weekly* and *Balou's Pictorial*. In 1861, when he was twenty-five years old, *Harper's Weekly* commissioned Homer as a visual journalist to cover the Civil War. Instead of covering the horrors of war as requested by his editors, Homer chose to paint the quiet scenes of life behind the deadly action. While these images weren't what the editors originally wanted, the subscribers appreciated them and they launched Homer's career as a painter.

Homer lived in New York City in the 1870s where he produced much work in his studio. In this period of post-war recovery, efforts were made to rejuvenate the nation; a piece of this was westward expansion. Artists began painting western frontiers and a national idealization of "childhood" to entice pioneers westward. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868-69) and Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* (1876) presented themes of renewal and youthful energy. Homer's love for rural life and childhood innocence translated into paintings that evoked both nostalgia and carefree lifestyles. Homer's *Snap the Whip* (1872) is an excellent example of youthful energy at play. As in many of Homer's paintings of children, no parents are present. Despite the lack of supervision, viewers know these children are safe and enjoying a carefree moment without the watchful eye of an adult, thus communicating the "west" as a safe environment.

In time, Homer's subject matter shifted from the innocence of childhood where his eye caught a quick glimpse of a playful pose to more classical poses with robust figures against the dangers of nature. This interest peaked in a visit to a fishing village near Newcastle, England, where Homer learned about the difficulties of the fishermen's life. He studied the sea: wave structure, strength of the surges, and the beauty of the climactic bursts of white foam. In 1883, Homer made a significant move to Maine's

rocky coastal town of Prout's Neck where he lived in a cottage far removed from any neighbors. For the next twenty-seven years Homer produced paintings of the sea. In this time and place, he preferred to visually tell the story of hardships and self-reliance as a testament to those individuals who lived such a life. In addition to oil paintings, Homer executed works in watercolor and advanced his art via wood engravings used for mass produced images in books and periodicals.

Throughout his life, Homer refused to give any personal information about his life and lived it reclusively. He was said to have been extraordinarily shy of women and never married. However, Homer had sensitivities about the everyday activities of women and often used women as the subjects in his paintings. In contrast to other male artists of the time, Homer's paintings exhibited great perception of and respect for women.

The early 1900s brought Winslow financial security from the sales of his paintings and real estate investments. In 1910, at the age of seventy-four, Winslow Homer died in his Prout's Neck home and was buried at the Mount Auburn Cemetery located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Winslow Homer's artistic reputation is that of the most prolific and influential American painters and printmakers of the postwar era.

About the Art

The Country School was painted, oil on canvas, in 1871 when Winslow Homer was thirty-five years old and is in the collection of the St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri.

At this time in American history, westward expansion brought thousands of eager settlers across the country in hopes of a new life. New communities were founded amidst farmland and ranches. At the center of these new communities was a schoolhouse, usually consisting of one room in which children of all ages gathered to learn.

The Country School depicts an image of school in session. Different from today, boys and girls sit on opposite sides of the classroom, the exception being the younger boy and girl on a bench on the right side of the painting. Supplies were hard to come by so it was common for materials, especially books, to be shared. Older students spend time reading or working on their own or tutoring a younger student. Notice the large slanted tables instead of the individual desks of today. The one-room school house is quite bare in comparison with today's classrooms.

Notice the barefooted students, an indication of warmer weather. The absence of older, teenaged students may indicate these stu-

Discipline-Based Art Education

The following components are integral to students having a complete, well rounded art experience.

Art Aesthetics

Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

Art Production

Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

Art History

Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

Art Criticism

Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

ELEMENTS OF ART

- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light.
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimalism
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

COMPOSITION

- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

ARTISTIC STYLES

- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE

BOOKS

Children's literature that relate to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:

- *Pioneer Summer* by Deborah Hopkinson
- *Wagon Wheels* by Barbara Brenner
- *O Pioneers!* By Willa Cather
- *Caddy Woodlawn* by Carol Ryrie Brink
- *A Prairie Winter* by Belle Owen
- *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder
- *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain

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dents were helping on the family farm at a critical time such as planting. The bouquet of cherry blossoms on the teacher's desk and the straw hat on the wall above the chalkboard are an indication of the season of spring.

It is not surprising to see a woman as the teacher as this was common practice at this time in history. Many men had died in the recent Civil War and those who survived were needed to help rebuild the county and homesteads. Both women and men who became teachers held a very honored position within the community.

In *The Country School*, the teacher is looking toward the group of three boys to her right. Perhaps they are working on an arithmetic problem, spelling, or reading.

Aside from the students and teacher, and a few tables and benches, the classroom looks rather barren—absent of many furnishings in classrooms today. The floor is made of wood and would be rather cold in the winter. The room is lit naturally by sunlight coming in through the windows.

While these students appear to be working hard, they probably enjoy their time together with friends rather than doing the manual chores they would be completing at home. Many of them may live quite a distance away from each other.

Winslow Homer successfully captured a special moment in American history by painting the one-room school house. "By the century's end, more than 200,000 one-room schools dotted the nation's landscape, and half of all American schoolchildren attended them."¹

Directed Observation

Show students an image of *The Country School* and tell them it was painted by Winslow Homer in 1871, a long time ago when Ulysses S. Grant was president. Describe to the students what life was like in the late 1800s. The following questions are provided as a means to encourage students to examine the art work. Be sure to give students time to think on your questions before calling on a particular student. Welcome additional observations students may offer.

1. Invite students to "walk into the painting." Use the See-Feel-Think-Wonder approach and invite students to write or say what they see. Encourage students to name what they see such as objects, people, and the building. Encourage students to also identify elements, including colors, lines, shapes, textures, space, forms

and value. Ask students to examine the painting and tell how Homer chose to arrange his painting. Invite students to share their feeling about the painting or even if they like or dislike the work. What do they think about when they view this painting? Finally, what do they wonder about?

2. Where do you as the viewer enter *The Country School*? Why did the artist create this vantage point for you? Do you feel like you're a welcome part of the class or an intruder?
3. If you were a student in this school, where would you sit? Who would be your friend? What would you do?
4. Who do you think is the most important person in this painting? How does the artist tell you that?
5. How do these students get to and from school? What will they do after school?
6. Based on what you see in the painting, why would you or wouldn't you want to attend this school?
7. Why is it helpful for Homer to create this painting for America? Why would it be important for an artist/photographer to paint/photograph your classroom?
8. Do you think Winslow Homer is a good painter? Why or why not? Examine other paintings by Winslow Homer.
9. If your job was to capture activities that took place in your school, what would you paint or photograph? What would you want others to know about your school they could remember forever through your art work?

Things to Do

1. Homer painted *The Country School* as if the viewer was standing or sitting at the end of the classroom or peeking through a window? Why do you think he did this? Choose a vantage point in your classroom to draw or paint. What and who will you include? What time of the day or season will you portray? What clues will you include to indicate the day or season?
2. Read books that tell stories of the frontier such as those by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Create sketches from the readings.
3. Invent names for the characters portrayed in Homer's *The Country School*. Create a story about them. What was their life outside school like? In what kind of house did they live? How did they dress?
4. Plan a pioneer day in your room, working and playing with what would be appropriate to that era. Take pictures!
5. Invite seniors to visit the classroom to share stories about life when they were young. Prepare questions in advance.