

ELIZABETH RIPLEY



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WINSLOW HOMER



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A Biography by
ELIZABETH RIPLEY

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Artist Biographies from
Elizabeth Ripley

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VINCENT VAN GOGH



GIRL ON A SWING, 1879
Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga

Front cover: *SNAP THE WHIP*, 1872, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
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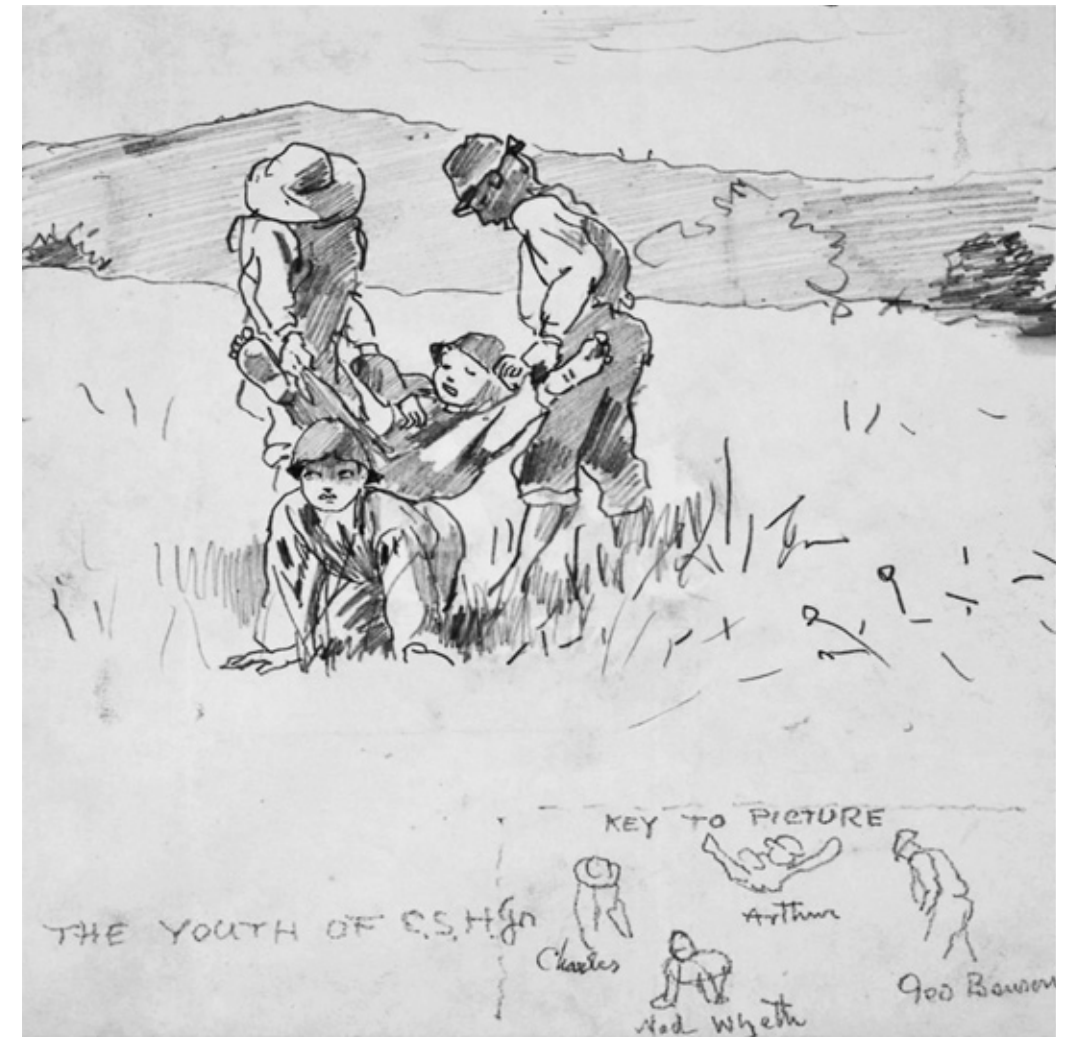
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WINSLOW was seven when his family moved into a big house in Cambridge, Massachusetts. One of the rooms was Mrs. Homer's studio. Winslow loved that room filled with flower paintings. He sat for hours watching his mother wash soft, transparent colors over neat pencil drawings. He looked longingly at the little pans of watercolor paints. Some day he would have watercolors of his own and then he would paint outdoors, where the sunlight made everything look sharp and clear.

When he went fishing with his brother Charles he would watch the changing reflections in the water and wonder how he could show this in a painting. He tried making sketches of his friends. One day, when he was eleven, he took his sketchbook out into the field where Charles and two boys were playing with his little brother Arthur. With quick strokes of his pencil he caught the action of the two older boys as they swung Arthur on the back of another boy who knelt between them. Some years later he lettered a title on the drawing. Then, before he gave it to his brother Charles, he added a key to the picture, so that each boy would be recognized.

His schoolmates watched with amazement as the sedate, quiet little Winslow decorated the margins of his textbooks. But Mr. Homer was not impressed. How could Winslow get to college if he wasted his time at school? Charles Homer, Sr., had worked to build up a successful hardware business so that he could send his three boys to Harvard. Charles would be the first, then two years later Winslow. But when Winslow finished school in the spring of 1854, Mr. Homer's business had failed. Winslow, now eighteen, would have to find a job.

Each day Mr. Homer scanned the "Boy Wanted" columns in the Boston paper. One morning a heading caught his eye. Bufford, the printer, was looking for an apprentice who "must have a taste for drawing." Here was the job for Winslow. Mr. Homer told the boy to pack up his carefully labeled drawings. Then father and son boarded the horse-drawn bus for Boston.



BEETLE AND WEDGE, c. 1847

Winslow refused to become a member of *Harper's* art department. Never again would he allow himself to be imprisoned in an office. He rented a ramshackle studio in the downtown section of New York and set to work making drawings of New York scenes. Soon the drawings appeared in *Harper's*. One showed ladies in hoop skirts and gentlemen in top hats skating in Central Park. At Christmastime Homer was given a two-page spread. On one side he pictured a rich family eating Christmas dinner, and on the other a poor starving family in the slums.

Not far from Winslow's studio was Mrs. Cushman's boardinghouse, where he ate his meals. There he met other young bachelors who had come to seek their fortune in New York. Some of these were struggling artists, who persuaded Winslow to join a class in New York's only art school. But he soon tired of drawing from plaster casts. Charles, now a successful chemist, offered to send his brother money for private lessons. Winslow refused the offer. He would finance his career himself, or else "give up the business."

He bought a box of watercolors, painted a picture from his skating scene, and sent it to the National Academy in New York. He waited anxiously for the decision of the jury. Then, a few weeks later, he wrote his mother that the Academy was hanging the picture in their spring exhibit. He knew she would be pleased.

Some of Winslow's artist friends lived in a gloomy, turreted building on Washington Square. When Winslow learned that the tower room was vacant, he climbed up a steep narrow stairway to inspect the little studio, which looked over the trees and rooftops. The view delighted him. He bought a cot, a stove, and a few odd chairs, and early in the winter of 1861 Winslow moved into the tower room.

He was busier than ever now. When President-elect Lincoln visited New York, Winslow was asked to draw him speaking from a balcony. He was sent to Washington to illustrate the inauguration. One month later, when war broke out between the North and South, *Harper's* asked Homer to be their "special artist" at the front.



SKATING ON CENTRAL PARK, 1861
Lithograph by Bufford and Co.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Charles' gay young wife, Mattie, was as outgoing as Winslow was reserved, but she understood her brother-in-law and responded to his dry humor. Soon Mattie and Winslow were close friends. She was eager for him to see the new house which Charles had bought in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He must come for a visit soon and help her hang the pictures.

Winslow accepted Mattie's invitation. One day when he was uncrating some paintings in the attic, he found his own canvas of the soldier in a tree. Suddenly he realized why his dealer had not told him who bought the painting. He should have guessed that it was Charles. How could he have been so fooled? Speechless with rage, he packed his bag and left the house.

There would be no fishing trip with Charles that summer. Instead, he and his Belmont cousins went on a camping trip to New Hampshire. He took along his sketchbook and drew his cousins riding over the rocky summit of Mt. Washington. He would try to remember that crisp mountain air so that he could reproduce it in a painting. In this sunny, peaceful atmosphere he almost forgot how angry he had been with Charles.

The feeling of bright New Hampshire sunlight stayed with him through the winter. His paintings were bathed in a clear, sunny light; and when he made drawings from his paintings, he found he could reproduce this atmosphere in black and white. Soon his drawings of New Hampshire scenes appeared in *Harper's*. The readers loved these pleasant subjects, which made them forget the grim war years. The next spring he decided to look for more vacation subjects—this time on the sea coast of New Jersey.



THE BRIDLE PATH, 1868
The Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts

When Winslow arrived in Nassau one December morning in 1884 he was dazzled by the brilliant sun. Never before had he seen such intense blue sky and sea, such pure white sand and lush green foliage. Vines laden with brilliantly colored flowers covered the whitewashed houses, and tall dark palm trees made striking patterns against the sky. He was fascinated by the dark-skinned natives. He painted watercolors of women in gaily colored dresses, carrying baskets on their heads. He went out with fishermen in their sailboats and sketched them catching sharks. The sight of sharks swimming around an empty dismantled sailboat impressed him, and he noted it in his sketchbook. He painted coral divers, their dark muscular bodies glistening in the sun. He worked quickly, knowing just where to wash on dark transparent shadows and where to leave white paper showing. His pictures were flooded with a white tropical light.

Before Winslow headed north he decided to explore another island.

“Here I am fixed for a month,” he wrote Charles from Cuba. “...this is a red hot place, full of soldiers.” But the threat of a Cuban revolution did not keep him from painting every day. He sketched the steep streets of Santiago de Cuba, the white Spanish houses with iron balconies and red tin roofs, and the old Spanish fort of Morro Castle.

But the heat and dust made painting difficult. “Very bad smells,” he wrote, “so hot that you must change your clothes every afternoon. I will be very glad to get home.”

Winslow landed in New York in April, left his watercolors with a dealer, and headed for Prouts Neck.

The next winter the Nassau pictures were exhibited. People who had like his Tynemouth watercolors thought these sparkling paintings look unfinished. Winslow was disappointed that they did not sell, but he knew that these watercolors were the most brilliant and vigorous he had ever painted.



THE CONCH DIVERS, 1885
Minneapolis Institute of Art

After a few weeks of fishing in the sunny waters of Key West, Winslow began to forget his bitter disappointment. He painted a few watercolors of little fishing boats manned with Negro crews. He explored the west coast of Florida and found a quiet spot where the Homossasa River emptied into the Gulf of Mexico. He was fascinated by the palms bending over the water, their dark spiked fronds silhouetted against a luminous sky.

When he returned to Maine that spring he was too busy to think of painting. There were roads to be repaired, trees to cut, and cottages to be made ready for summer visitors.

“They’re coming earlier every year,” he complained to Charles. He never liked to see them come. It was always difficult to avoid those ladies who wanted to meet the famous artist. When they bothered him in his garden, he would tell them brusquely that Mr. Homer was not at home. When a stranger knocked on his door he would open it a crack, then slam it in his face. Friends and family knew that they must knock three times if they wanted to get an answer.

The local priest called one evening to collect money for his church. Winslow glared at him through the crack.

“Even my own brothers wouldn’t disturb me at this hour,” he growled.

“But,” replied the priest, “I am not your brother, Mr. Homer; I am your father.”

Winslow, amused, invited the priest inside and gave him money for the church.

Winslow hardly ever turned the native people from his door. Sometimes the butcher sat for hours in the studio, smoking his pipe and making comments about Winslow’s paintings. If a family was in trouble, Winslow gave them money.

In the fall of 1904 Homer wrote his New York dealer that he was working on two oil paintings. He did not want the dealer to show his watercolors. “They are too common and cheap,” he wrote, “and what I am painting now is of quite another order.”



PALM TREES, FLORIDA, 1904
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston