# Winslow Homer

*Still the best angling artist in the world.*

by Brooke Chilvers

Unless you can prove otherwise, Winslow Homer is still the best watercolor artist ever to capture the magic that results when you combine a fighting fish and a skilled angler with a taut line.

Whether fly fishing for trout in the chill rapids of the Adirondacks and Quebec or casting for bass in the lazy waters of Florida's Homosassa River, Homer's angling watercolors have yet to be surpassed.

Unlike sporting artists who get stuck forever repackaging the same story in the same colors, Homer's body of some 100 angling works continually evolved in composition, tone and palette—each development inspired by different waters at different stages of his life. From the first time he fished the Adirondacks in the 1870s to his final days fishing in Florida, each of the three great chapters of Homer's angling career expanded his artistic imagination.

Over a period of 40 years, the lifelong bachelor returned for months at a time to his favorite fishing spots in New York, Quebec and Florida. A devoted angler with a Victorian view of fly fishing's inherent nobility, his vast experience allowed him to seize the character of each place: the distinct colors and qualities cast by its light, the density of its foliage and how it occupies the shore, the reflective surfaces of pools, streams, rapids and waterfalls and the evanescent hues of a wet fish, from brook trout to black bass, in the brief thrilling moment of its rise to the fly.

Homer was singularly suited to be both artist and angler. Replacing family life with the sporting life, he was as taciturn and reticent as the Quebec guides who appear in numerous works. Reserved, small, naturally frugal and meticulous, the self-taught artist left behind little in writing about his thoughts on art or life. We do know from the book *Winslow Homer: Artist and Angler* (Patricia Junker and Sarah Burns, Thames & Hudson, 2002) that an 1839 French treatise on color theory by a textile dyer for the Gobelins Tapestry Works stayed within him throughout his life. The treatise described how surrounding colors influence color perception and led Homer to the constant experimentation so obvious in his work.

His fabulous palette—dark violet, ultramarine, midnight blue and viridian combined in a single sky—also benefited from his lifelong close relationship with his supportive older brother, Charles, himself a color chemist in the textile industry and interested in pigments for art, *à la* Victor and Vincent Van Gogh. Homer built his home next to Charles and his family in Prouts Neck, Maine, and left his entire estate to his brother.

As one of the few artists belonging to The North Woods Club in Essex County, New York, and the only artist at Quebec's exclusive Tourilli Club, Homer was perfectly positioned to translate angling into art. Men catching fish is Homer's subject, and every picture is a fisherman's tale. Many of his works epitomize an almost spiritual time and place, where the angler's experience, skills and finely tuned tackle are pitted against the instincts of a valiant game fish in untamed waters. These are sacred moments in an angler's life, when the reflective surface of a Florida lake or tidal river catches the sunset shadows and shapes of towering palmettos, when from that stillness anything can strike: channel bass, sea trout or sheepshead; a tiny sunfish might steal the fly or a huge largemouth bass might burst from the water.

The accuracy and authenticity of Homer's work—the Scarlet Ibis fly, the ephemeral colors of a jumping trout, the three-quarter bend of a split-cane rod—earned him the respect of generations of the demanding sportsmen he targeted as his buyers. "If you could get the address of the members of the Adirondack Club or any other sporting club so as to have things already to send out invitations it would be well," wrote Homer regarding an exposition of his 33 Adirondack works that "treat

exclusively of fish and fishing."

And yet Homer, with his often unclear distinction between arm, rod and line moving together in one dynamic action, isn't a Realist artist in the tradition of Samuel Kilbourne or J. L. Petrie. Although painted with the attention of a naturalist, no splash accompanies his leaping trout; no water flies off his bass fiercely twisting to dislodge the fly. And although the quality of light always evokes the vital sense of place, there is rarely a literal source.

Instead, an ever-increasing economy of detail, larger blocks of background and the varying relative space occupied by water, trees, fish or figures together contributed to his strong experimental perspectives and compositions and pushed him further toward the abstract. Some critics call him "the last of the Hudson River School," because with Homer nature is more than a mere backdrop and fish aren't just color devices, "like copper pots in a Flemish interior."

With its huge hooked salmon boldly suspended in the forefront, *A Good Pool, Saguenay River* (1895), is a powerful, imaginative work that alludes to the "big fish story" illustrations then appearing in magazines such as *American Angler.* It is a distinctly "Homeric" work, daringly composed with intensive fields of strong saturated colors that push the fish farther toward the viewer; loose strokes of white create the tempestuous weather and sea. The guides struggling to control the canoe while the angler struggles to control the fighting salmon show Homer's respect for teamwork. The gracefully looping leader with multiple red flies between fisherman and fish neatly ties the whole scene together.

One writer compares Homer's ravishing fish to tropical birds; his troutlings sport bars on their sides, and fish are colored according to their age, weight and water. And yet Homer's purpose is artistic expression, not scientific study of a sport where often-present but anonymous guides are surrounded by an exuberant and abundant nature.

Although Homer continued to visit the Adirondacks until his death in 1910, after 1902 he never again painted an angling scene there. By the time the fishing began to peter out (his North Woods Club take for 1894 was two pickerel), Homer had already begun making extended trips to the wilder waters of Quebec (joining the Tourilli Club in 1893), which resulted in 50 watercolors and two oils. The works from this chapter of his fishing life show a new energy, embodying an unrestrained nature, more turbulent waters, brasher gamefish and the hard work of the portage and handling canoes in choppy waters. Although Homer's palette is paler, even monochromatic in some works, watercolor remains his preferred medium for the fluid, spontaneous actions of fishermen casting and the liquid play of water and sky. Backgrounds are simpler still, with movement created by calligraphic strokes of China or opaque white.

Quebec's rugged rapids and rough accommodations were becoming too much for Homer when, at age 50, he discovered Florida and its Lake Monroe, and the St. Johns and Homosassa Rivers. Although the fish were new to him, he produced fewer than a dozen angling watercolors of Florida, and they didn't sell well. Yet his work reached new heights in this vivid setting of shorelines thick with Spanish moss and the tropical shapes and greens of cedars, mangroves and spiky palms and palmettos. The style is even lighter and looser, a simplified shorthand expressing the fleeting nature of exciting interactions with gamefish. Gold and bright vermilion are mixed into abstract dances of horizons, reflections and sun-soaked light.

Interestingly, some of the best angling artwork of the time was generated for advertisements in magazines such as *The American Sportsman.* Magazines—and improved color lithography techniques—helped create both a market for artists like Winslow Homer and, for better or worse, the industry of angling tourism. Industrialists built huge hotels and cut railroads through the great forests to bring in loads of tourists and take out millions of logs.

In 1885, 2.8 million acres of the Adirondacks were declared a New York Forest Preserve. Although this was great news for the preservation of the region, it also signaled the beginning of the end of a kind of wilderness experience that has since nearly vanished. For Homer—both the angler and artist—fishing stocked ponds and park-preserve trout could never compare to hunting down a natural old monster in the wild.

Although salmon still visit the protected upper Saguenay and its tributaries, the trout fishing in the Adirondacks suffers from acid rain, and hydroelectric stations, aluminum plants and paper mills have disfigured some of Homer's other favored fishing spots.

Still, there must be an angling artist today with the stout-heartedness—and resolute bachelorhood—to go as far and stay as long as it takes with rod and easel to find for himself Homer's muse. ■

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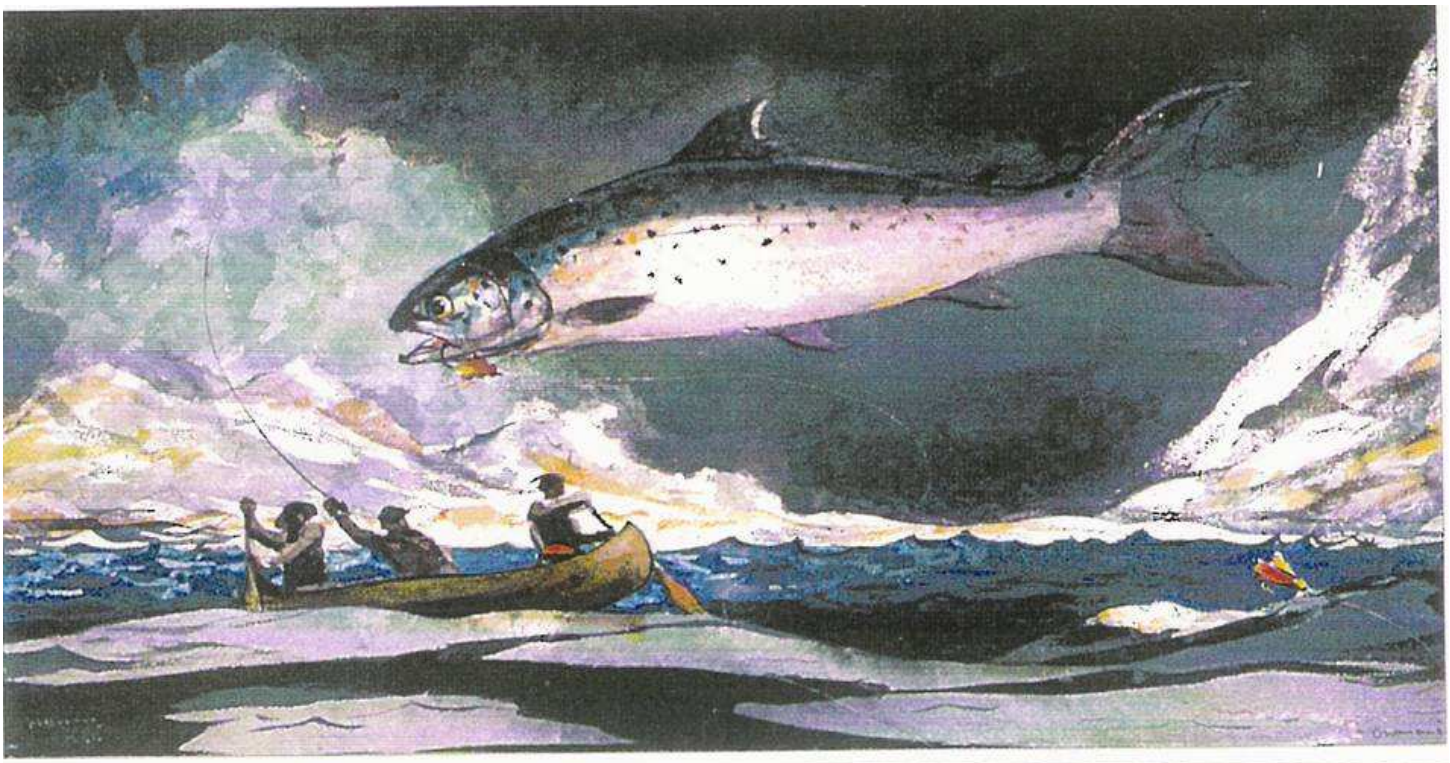
*Brooke wrote of Winslow Homer during a long sojourn in the tsetse-fly-infested Tanzanian bush. Remembering the black flies on camping trips in Newfoundland and Labrador, she cannot decide which is worse.*



*"A Good Pool, Saguenay River," (1895), an original watercolor and pencil on paper, 9 ¾ x 18 ⅞ inches, by Winslow Homer (1836-1910). Courtesy of Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.*