

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine

# Winslow Homer and the Camera: Photography and the Art of Painting

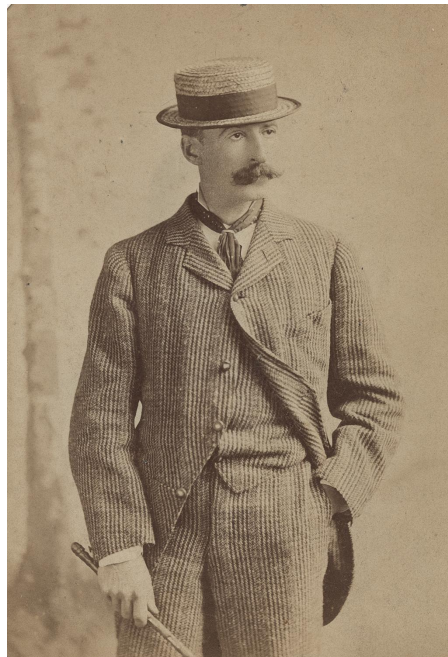
by Jeanne Schinto

The idea of a small masterpiece lying around somewhere unnoticed—a Homer in a hayloft—never fails to stir our imagination. The object that launched five years of research by the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Maine, and has culminated in a fascinating, multilayered exhibition was not a newly discovered Winslow Homer painting but the artist's camera. The little wooden box sold by Britain's Mawson & Swan in the period 1881-82 has the initials "W.H." scratched into its plate holder. Now in the museum's collection, the verified artifact is the undisputed inspiration for *Winslow Homer and the Camera: Photography and the Art of Painting*. The show is on view at Bowdoin

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through October 28; it then travels to the Brandywine River Museum of Art in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and will be on view from November 17 through February 17, 2019.

The camera had been sitting in a trophy case in a corridor of Scarborough High School in Scarborough, Maine. The town includes a land spit called Prouts Neck, where Homer (1836-1910) lived and painted for a quarter of a century. From the second floor of his studio, a structure restored and open to the public by arrangement with the Portland Museum of Art, one can see the dramatic Atlantic views that the artist saw while he worked. Visitors can also trace his steps along the cliff walk where he watched the waves exploding against the rock ledges—the subject of many of his most brilliant seascapes. When the town's high school underwent a renovation, the camera, which had been on a long-term loan, was returned to its owner, Scarborough resident and firefighter Neal Paulsen. In the fall of 2013, the Bowdoin museum's curator, Joachim Homann, received a phone call from Paulsen. He told Homann that the camera had been a gift to him from his grandfather, who had received it from the Homer family in the 1930s in exchange for electric work. Paulsen said

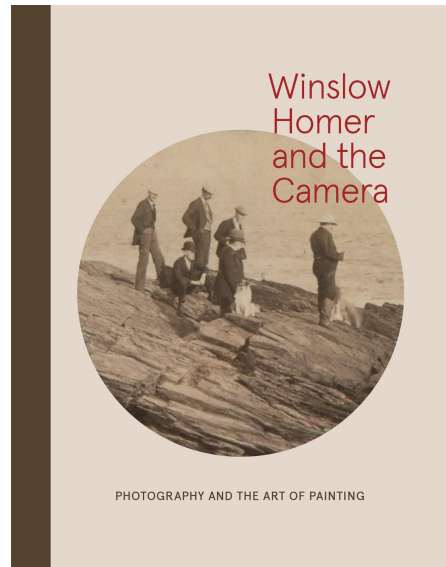


*Winslow Homer in New York, 1880, albumen silver print by Napoleon Sarony (1821-1896). Photo courtesy Bowdoin College Museum of Art.*

he had been wondering if the museum had any more information about it.

It's well known that the college is the repository for the Homer family archives. A Bowdoin professor and former director of the museum, Philip C. Beam (1910-2005), befriended the artist's nephew Charles L. Homer shortly after arriving at Bowdoin in 1936. Beam was given complete access to the papers when he wrote *Winslow Homer at Prout's [sic] Neck*, a biography published in 1966. Bowdoin has been the center of Homer studies ever since the papers and memorabilia went there at about the same time. After the phone call, Homann walked into the office of museum co-director Frank H. Goodyear III and told him what he had heard. Goodyear, the author of several books about photography, recently recalled his reaction. "Joachim and I looked at each other, and both of us said, 'Winslow Homer took photographs?' And now here's his camera? It was one of those stories that sound too good to be true."

Goodyear and Dana E. Byrd, a Bowdoin assistant professor of art history who specializes in American art and material



*Winslow Homer and the Camera: Photography and the Art of Painting*, 2018, by Dana E. Byrd and Frank H. Goodyear III, hardbound, 208 pages, published by Bowdoin College Museum of Art, in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, \$45. An essay by Goodyear addresses the general subject of the exhibition. Byrd's essay "Trouble in Paradise?: Winslow Homer in the Bahamas, Cuba, and Florida, 1884-1886" is focused on his tropical pictures, which represent the realities of these regions (a cockfight, a native hut) as well as their touristic beauty.

culture, began to consult experts around the country, and eventually they conceived the exhibition and became its co-curators. Multiple pieces of evidence convinced the two that the camera had the provenance Paulsen claimed for it. A dozen or so experts vetted the initials. "Not only did they look good, but it's known that Homer put his name or initials on virtually everything he owned," Goodyear said. In addition to the "W.H.," a date, "August 15, 1882," had been scratched into the plate holder. It falls within the period, March 15, 1881, through November 24, 1882, when Homer was known to be living and working in Cullercoats, a British fishing village no more than ten miles from where the camera was made by Mawson & Swan of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Besides these identifying marks,



This is the camera owned by Winslow Homer that was lately removed from the trophy case at Scarborough High School, Scarborough, Maine, and generously given to the Bowdoin College Museum of Art by Neal Paulsen in memory of James Ott and in honor of David James Ott (Bowdoin College class of '74). It was made by Mawson & Swan of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1881-82. Photo credit Dennis Griggs, Tannery Hill Studio, Topsham, Maine.

one more element provided affirmation. In the Homer family archives are about a hundred photos, including many of the cliffs at Prouts Neck, that are the same size, 3" x 4", that this camera would have taken.

Goodyear and Byrd nonetheless proceeded with care. "There is only one photo that we can absolutely commit to Homer having made with it," said Byrd. "It's in the show, and it's terrible." He was a painter first and foremost, using photos as source material only, not as an alternative way to create art. However, like many other artists of the period, he was forced to grapple with the new form of technology that rapidly became part of the visual economy. And so the challenge that the duo faced was not to make too much of the camera but not too little of it, either.

The artist is known, in fact, to have owned two other cameras. During his time abroad, he bought a second British example. Made by London's Marion & Company, it was given by the Homer family to the Worcester Art Museum in Worcester, Massachusetts, in the 1920s. The third camera, now lost, was a Kodak #1, received by the artist from his older brother, Charles Savage Homer Jr., in 1888. That camera took small circular photographs, a series of 100 on a roll, after which the camera with the film still inside it was designed to be sent back to Kodak for development.



*Cliff at Prout's [sic] Neck*, a circa 1885 albumen silver print attributed to Winslow Homer. Photo courtesy Bowdoin College Museum of Art.



Compare the photo (left) of a Prouts Neck cliff attributed to Homer with his 1894 oil in canvas painting *High Cliff, Coast of Maine*. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Photo credit Art Resource, New York.







**Canoe in Rapids**, an 1897 watercolor over graphite by Winslow Homer, bears resemblance to photos of canoeists from the Homer family archives. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum. Photo courtesy Imaging Department. © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

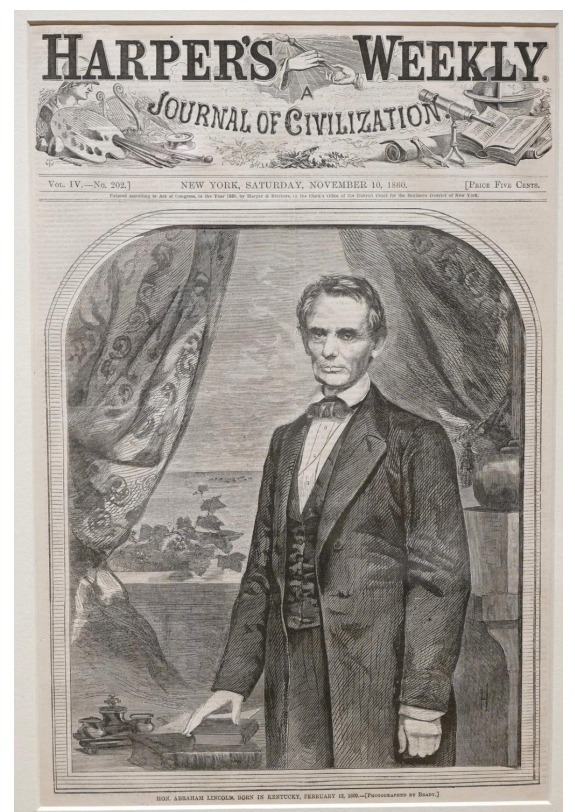


**The Fountains at Night**, *World's Columbian Exposition*, 1893, oil on canvas by Winslow Homer. Photo courtesy Bowdoin College Museum of Art.



On the right is the Bowdoin College Museum of Art's Walker Art Building, designed in 1894 by Charles Follen McKim of McKim, Mead & White. On the left is the museum's 2007 renovation and expansion by Machado Silvetti. Schinto photo.

In making the drawing for this engraving, *Portrait of Abraham Lincoln, Born in Kentucky, February 12, 1809*, that ran on the cover of an 1860 issue of *Harper's Weekly*, Homer took the essentials from a Mathew Brady photograph, then made significant changes. He reduced the size of Lincoln's ears, minimized the sunken aspect of his cheeks, and added the background with drapes. The alterations were in the interest of making the former candidate, who was the president-elect, look more "presidential," according to exhibition co-curator Dana Byrd. Photo courtesy Bowdoin College Museum of Art.



A gelatin silver print enlargement, *River Scene, Florida*, from a 1904-05 photo made by a Kodak #1 and attributed to Homer, is in the exhibition, on loan from the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Large reproductions of other oval photographs from the Homer family archives are on view. Several show fishing scenes in Quebec that uncannily are like some of Homer's watercolors. At a public presentation at Bowdoin, Byrd showed a slide of men paddling a canoe, one of the Quebec photos. The vantage point is from another vessel following closely behind it. When she showed the next slide, of a Homer watercolor that pictures canoeists from the same, low perspective on the water, the audience gasped at the similitude.

The same audience was also audibly impressed by Byrd's gloss of Homer's 1893 oil on canvas painting *The Fountains at Night*, *World's Columbian Exposition*. Because of its grisaille palette, she pointed out, it resembles a black-and-white photograph. It even has a hint of stop action. A gondola is part of the scene, its front tip just beyond the edge of the frame, as it would have been if a photographer had momentarily fumbled while readying to take the shot of the boat sweeping past. It's a good example of the effect that photographic images in general may have had on the artist's eye. Previous scholars have noted the influence of photography in Homer's artistic practice. It's also true that many other 19th-century artists made use of the medium, and the phenomenon has not escaped academic attention. But no study has devoted the kind of prolonged attention to Homer and photography that this exhibition does.

Homer was already in his mid-40s when he went to Cullercoats. He had long been working in New York. The trip was intended to help him make a break before he began a new chapter of his career. When he returned from

England, he moved to Maine, where he spent the rest of his life. His art changed after that change of residence. There are many reasons why. But, as those who make the effort to seek out this compelling exhibition or buy its excellent catalog will learn, there is a good case to be made that photography was one of those reasons. It's also arguable that, right from the beginning, Homer used photography as a tool. During his apprenticeship he made drawings by copying or referencing photographs of politicians, military officers, and other public figures. Indeed, when he was working as an illustrator for *Harper's Weekly* and other publications, he completed more than a dozen drawings for wood engravings that were based on photographs by Mathew Brady or his associates, whose New York studio at 785 Broadway was five blocks from Homer's in the celebrated Tenth Street Studio Building on Washington Square. These include an 1860 portrait of Abraham Lincoln as president-elect and a scene of Lincoln's first inaugural at the U.S. Capitol.

The beauty of this exhibition, however, is that it goes well beyond the theme of Homer's technique and artistic strategies. For example, it cleverly makes use of Homer's depictions of the act of looking through other types of lenses besides those of cameras. A soldier with a rifle perched in a tree looks through his scope, waiting for the enemy, in *Sharpshooter*. A mariner uses an octant to navigate in *Eight Bells*. A ship's captain looks through a spyglass in *The Approach of the British Pirate "Alabama."* Homer's early training, as an eyewitness reporter-illustrator, particularly during the Civil War, served him well. He was always looking outward, not inward, and in that light it's significant that he never painted a formal self-portrait.

That fact plays into the so-called Winslow Homer myth, which makes much of his supposed reclusive tendencies.

This exhibition seeks to dispel that falsehood by presenting studio portraits of the artist. "The cold, severe seas, home to old sailors with grizzled, undulating beards, boots, rubber coat, head turned to one side in a rocky smile. Is it Winslow Homer?" the critic Elizabeth Hardwick, who summered in Castine, once asked, in her 1971 essay "In Maine," recently reprinted in *The Collected Essays* (2017). Given the Napoleon Sarony studio photo that depicts the artist as a dapper gentleman in a woolen striped suit and straw boater, the only correct answer to Hardwick's question is a testy one: "I think not."

Approximately 130 objects have been gathered for this show, which takes up most of the lower level of the museum. Two-thirds are from Bowdoin's own rich holdings. Crucial other items came from private collections and other institutions, including three Maine museums—the Portland Museum of Art, Colby College Museum of Art, and the Farnsworth Art Museum—with which Bowdoin enjoys an unusually close collegial relationship. Besides artworks in multiple media, there are artifacts, such as Homer's watercolor box and brushes, and a white canvas knapsack on which is written in large black letters in his hand, "Homer Scarborough Me." On view too, of course, is the camera, which Neal Paulsen might easily have driven down to one of the New York auction houses and consigned. Instead, he generously donated it to the museum. As of this writing, Goodyear was awaiting experts from the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York, who were coming to examine it. Goodyear said, smiling: "We're eager to see if the thing works."

For more information, see the Bowdoin website ([www.bowdoin.edu/art-museum](http://www.bowdoin.edu/art-museum)).





Frank H. Goodyear III and Dana E. Byrd, co-curators of *Winslow Homer and the Camera*. Schinto photo.



*River Scene, Florida*, a 1904-05 gelatin silver print enlargement from a photo made by a Kodak #1. It is attributed to Winslow Homer. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts. Photo credit Michael Agee.



On the left is an 1882 albumen silver print of Cullercoats attributed to Winslow Homer. It shows a man hoisting a sail on a coble, a type of fishing boat developed in the northeast coast of England. The image was found mounted inside Homer's copy of Michel Eugene Chevreul's *The Laws of Contrast of Colour*. It's labeled "Sept. 1882. Cullercoats." Private collection. Image courtesy The Strong Museum, Rochester, New York.



Winslow Homer's watercolor paint box. Photo courtesy Bowdoin College Museum of Art.



The banner advertising the exhibition at the entrance of the museum shows a reproduction of *Winslow Homer at Marshfield*, a circa 1869 albumen silver print by an unknown photographer. The subject is Homer on a beach on Boston's south shore with his dog Jack. Schinto photo.



The larger camera, made by Britain's Mawson & Swan, 1881-82, was the gift of Neal Paulsen to Bowdoin. The smaller one, gifted to the Worcester Art Museum by the Homer family, was made circa 1881 by London's Marion & Company. Schinto photo.

