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More than Blue and Gray: The Civil War and American Art

by Jeanne Schinto



Photos courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

The scholarly argument of *The Civil War and American Art*, on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, is that the conflict, while testing the resiliency of our young nation, also forever changed American art. Curated by the Met's H. Barbara Weinberg and organized by Eleanor Jones Harvey of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the show presents many familiar classics among the 60 paintings and 18 photographs chosen for the show. Its strength and originality lies in the unexpected choices.

Among works by such masters as Winslow Homer, Eastman Johnson, Sanford Robinson Gifford, and Frederic Edwin Church, there are few actual battle scenes and no history paintings at all. Rather, there are portraits, genre scenes, and landscapes, some of them not even American landscapes. The point is that war, any war, like dust kicked up by a terrible wind, finds its way into every citizen's pores, and the artists can't help but express it in metaphor, consciously or otherwise.

Sometimes the artists of the Civil War era were right in the thick of it. Gifford, for one, was a member of the Union's Seventh Regiment. On November 16, 2007, I saw his 1862 *Sunday Prayers* (study for *Sunday Morning in the Seventh Regiment Camp*), a little (7" x 12 1/4") sunlit scene, sell at Skinner, Inc., in Boston to Richard Rossello of Avery Galleries for \$831,000. Now here it was on loan from a private collection, next to a larger version, *Preaching to the Troops, or Sunday Morning at Camp Cameron near Washington*. Both are scenes of tranquility: the men are listening to a sermon on a perfect day between battles. The larger painting is owned by the Union League Club, founded in 1863 to help garner support for the war effort; Gifford was a member of the Union League Club.

As for Church, he had a friend, Theodore Winthrop, who was among the first Union soldiers to die in the war, at the Battle of Bethel Church, Virginia, on June 10, 1861. In response, Church painted in the same year the oil on paper *Our Banner in the Sky*, which is on the cover of the exhibition's catalog. It depicts a Union flag as a fiery sunset of stripes along with a patch of twinkling stars against a blue background. Surely it was a hopeful, willful message from Church at a time when most people believed the outcome of the war would be quickly decided. No one could foresee that it would drag on for years, taking somewhere between 650,000 and 850,000 lives. (The total has been increased upward by new research.)

Famously, Winslow Homer contributed multiple illustrations of the war to *Harper's Weekly*. A citizen-artist embedded with the Union troops, he is represented in this exhibition with at least a dozen oils. One is his famous 1865 *The Veteran in a New Field*, showing a farmer slicing through wheat with an antiquated scythe. Home from battle, this man inevitably fought in fields just like the one in which he's now toiling. What is labeled as Homer's only depiction of the war from the Confederate point of view, his 1864 *Defiance: Inviting a Shot Before Petersburg*, shows a Rebel soldier, a foolish martyr to his cause, standing on top of a bunker, egging on the Union side.

Until viewing this exhibition I had not seen Homer's *Skirmish in the Wilderness*, an 1864 oil on canvas lent by the New Britain Museum of Art in Connecticut. As in his *Defiance* and in every other image Homer made of this war, he doesn't show combat overtly, only suggests it. In *Skirmish*, we have a group of Union soldiers hidden by cover of trees, rifles pointed, a wounded comrade at their feet. Homer's 1863 *Sharpshooter*, his first ever oil on canvas, depicts a soldier taking aim while perched on a tree branch. In the show it's right next to Albert Bierstadt's 1862 oil on panel *Guerrilla Warfare, Civil War*. The tactics of surprise and guile were part of the style of warfare, treacherous and very effective, but Bierstadt had no experience of it. When drafted in 1863, he paid for a substitute to serve in his place. According to the Smithsonian's Harvey, he created this painting from photographs. She describes it as "quintessentially" the work of a "voyeur." But as its inclusion in this show says, that's part of the story too.

Among works that give the home-front context are several by Eastman Johnson, best known for his genre scenes. His 1859 oil on linen *Negro Life in the South* depicts slave-quarter life with a realistically portrayed banjo player at its center, but the more intriguing character is off to the side. A white or mixed-race woman is literally stepping into the picture through an entryway. She may be someone who has "passed" and is visiting the friends and family she has left behind, or she may be mistress of the household. Either way, she serves as a bridge between separate worlds.

Johnson's *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves* is a dramatic rendering of a man, a woman, and two children on a galloping horse. The woman with babe in arms looks back over her shoulder, probably at pursuers. Johnson claimed to have based the painting on an event he witnessed on March 2, 1862, near the scene of battle at Manassas, Virginia, as slaves on horseback raced toward their protectors behind Union lines. Some scholars read the woman's skin as white. She is indeed lighter skinned, so this may well be an even more complex painting than it first seems.

It's instructive to contrast *The Fugitive Slaves* with another family group by Johnson, *Christmas Time, The Blodgett Family*. The 1864 oil on canvas from the Met's collection shows abolitionist William Tilden Blodgett with his wife and three children, enjoying the holiday in a well-appointed room. Truly it's an idyllic setting, including the Christmas tree in the corner, but there is a disturbing detail. The son is playing with a jig doll—a black man wearing a Union uniform—as his two sisters look on. How many people see this picture in other contexts without even noticing the doll or realizing what its inclusion meant to contemporary viewers?

I myself have seen Johnson's *The Girl I Left Behind Me* many times without fully understanding it. An 1872 oil on canvas that belongs to the Smithsonian, it had alternative titles before Johnson settled on borrowing the title of a popular regimental ballad of the Civil War era. The girl, actually a young woman, is a soldier's wife. Her wedding ring shows prominently on her left hand as she holds three books to her chest. Scholars say she is watching her husband leave for the war, the red of her swirling cape a symbol of her passionate love. But the postwar date of the painting suggests that Johnson meant her to stand for all wives left behind in wartime who wonder if they'll ever see their beloveds again. The red might just as easily be a symbol of spilled blood.

Among the most memorable paintings in this show is Jervis McEntee's *The Fire of Leaves*, showing two boys, one in blue, one in Confederate butternut, huddled together, tending a little fire in the woods. This is not a genre scene. The friends are just a small spot in what is otherwise a landscape. That's why the picture is so effective and not the least bit sentimental.

Least engaging for me was a series of pictures by Conrad Wise Chapman. An enlisted Confederate soldier-artist wounded at Shiloh, he worked on commission to produce images of such things as the Confederate submarine *H.L. Hunley*. Although these pictures do their part to represent the Confederate side, they are more illustrative than anything else, proving beyond all doubt the enduring power of metaphor.

The exhibition's convincing argument (that the war changed American art forever) reaches its crescendo in the concluding section of the show, largely devoted to huge landscapes by Frederic Church. Initially, I wondered why his *Cotopaxi*, an 1862 depiction of an Ecuadorian volcano, was here. It was here because of his 1866 *Rainy Season in the Tropics* with its huge, luminescent rainbow in the sky above the Andes. After reading the signage I understood. A volcano is an eruption; it explodes, like a bomb. A rainbow is a symbol of hope and peace.

The inclusion of his *1865 Aurora Borealis*, showing arctic explorer Isaac Israel Hayes's S.S. *United States* icebound, also makes good sense. Ordinarily, a vision of the northern lights is seen as a glorious display of nature, but Church's contemporary viewers would have understood it as a portent of disaster. They would have interpreted the frozen ship as a metaphor for our country, paralyzed by its war between brothers. That must have been what abolitionist Blodgett saw. He brought the painting. It was later donated to the Smithsonian by his daughter Eleanor, she being one of the two little girls in the Christmas picture by Johnson.

The photographs in this exhibition are well-known images of war dead by Alexander Gardner, Timothy H. O'Sullivan, and others, and selections from the work of George H. N. Barnard, who photographed several campaigns as an official Union photographer. (We'll save our comments about Civil War photography for a review of the Met's complementary show, *Photography & the American Civil War*.)

Previously seen at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, *The Civil War and American Art* ends its run at the Met on September 2. There is a catalog available. For more information, see the Web site (www.metmuseum.org).

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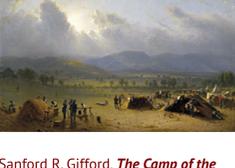
Albert Bierstadt, *Guerrilla Warfare, Civil War*, 1862, oil on panel, 15 1/2" x 18 5/8". The Century Association, New York, New York.



Conrad Wise Chapman, *The Flag of Sumter, October 20, 1863*, 1863-64, oil on board, 11 1/2" x 15 1/2". Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia, 0985.14.37L. Photography by Alan Thompson.



Frederic E. Church, *Our Banner in the Sky*, 1861, oil on paper, 7 1/2" x 11 1/4". Private collection.



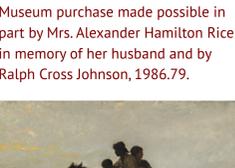
Sanford R. Gifford, *The Camp of the Seventh Regiment near Frederick, Maryland, 1863*, 1864, oil on canvas, 18" x 30". New York State Military Museum, New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs, Saratoga Springs, New York.



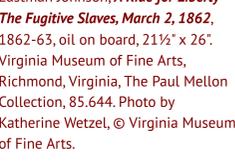
Winslow Homer, *Home, Sweet Home*, 1863, oil on canvas, 21 1/2" x 16 1/2". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Patrons' Permanent Fund, 1997.72.1. Image courtesy National Gallery of Art.



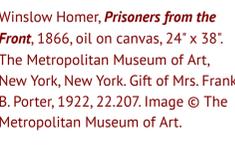
Eastman Johnson, *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, 1870-75, oil on canvas, 42" x 34 7/8". Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Museum purchase made possible in part by Mrs. Alexander Hamilton Rice in memory of her husband and by Ralph Cross Johnson, 1986.79.



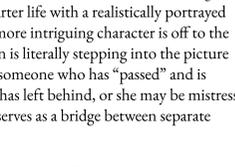
Eastman Johnson, *A Ride for Liberty—The Fugitive Slaves, March 2, 1862*, 1862-63, oil on board, 21 1/2" x 26". Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia, The Paul Mellon Collection, 85.644. Photo by Katherine Wetzel. © Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.



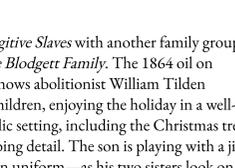
Winslow Homer, *Prisoners from the Front*, 1866, oil on canvas, 24" x 38". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. Gift of Mrs. Frank B. Porter, 1922, 22.207. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



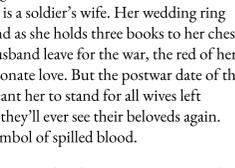
Eastman Johnson, *Negro Life in the South*, 1859, oil on linen. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.



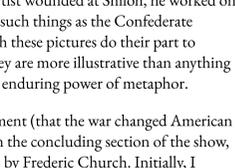
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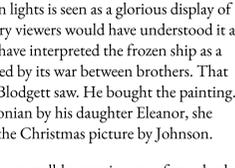
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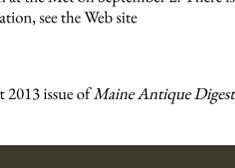
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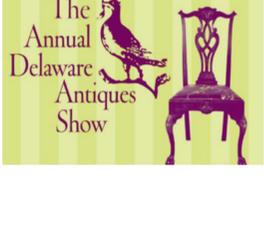


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