

Winslow Homer (1836 - 1910)

FAME V

October 2008

Set the scene for a fishing trip on the ocean. Parent can wear fishing vest and have a child volunteer wear a poncho and hold a fishing pole. Have hand-held fan and spray bottle filled with salt water, if desired.

When you see a person dressed like this, what kind of job do you think he or she has? *(A fisherman)*
What kind of weather do you think they might be facing? *(Ask for at least 3-4 vocabulary words describing bad weather)*

How many of you have ever been fishing? I'd like everyone to imagine being on a fishing boat on the ocean – feel the wind softly blowing and the ocean spraying your face. *(Use the fan and salt water bottle to simulate the feeling of ocean spray)* Feel the boat gently rocking as you hold onto the sides of the boat to steady yourself. Lick your lips – what do you taste? *(Salt water)*

Can you guess what our painting is going to show today? *(Sea, fisherman – turn print over)*

The American artist we will talk about today is Winslow Homer. He absolutely loved the sea. In fact, the studio where he painted in Maine was practically hanging out over the ocean, so he could make sure the colors of paint he used were the same as in the real ocean. He also loved fishing and many of his paintings were of people fishing. *(Show picture of Winslow and his brother Charlie carrying fish)*

What kind of day do you think it was in this painting? Are these people just going out to fish, or are they returning home? Look for some clues. *(Be sure to hold the painting up close so that they can see the fish in the bottom of the boat)* If you said “going home” you're right! The fish in the bottom of the boat show us that they are done fishing. The name of this painting is “Breezing Up”, sometimes also called “A Fair Wind”.

Let's talk a little about Winslow Homer's life before we look at his paintings more closely...

Homer's mother, Henrietta, probably most influenced him to start painting. Winslow loved watching his mother paint with watercolors, as was the custom of the ladies at that time, especially her pictures of flowers. He started drawing himself, and this often got him in trouble at school. He wasn't a very good student, and he liked to draw in all his school notebooks instead of doing his schoolwork.

Winslow was one of three boys, and when he was 13, his father caught gold fever and the family left New England and went off to California. Unfortunately, after staying for only two years, they lost everything to a claim jumper and had to return to New England. At age 19, Winslow got a job working for Harper's Weekly magazine doing enormously detailed woodcuts, and, when the Civil War broke out, was sent to the front lines to sketch the troops in battle. This is when he left the woodcuts behind and made the switch to oil painting. He never took any lessons, but taught himself to paint.

Have you ever lost confidence in your ability? Well, Homer did and he decided that he would enter two of his paintings of soldiers into an exhibition – if the paintings did not sell, he would take a salaried job with the magazine and forget about being an artist. Lucky for us, both pictures sold, but it wasn't until many years later that Winslow discovered that it was his older brother, Charlie, who bought the paintings because he didn't want Winslow to quit his painting career. Winslow was furious with him!

Now let's look at today's painting. Homer finished painting "Breezing Up" in 1876, but can you guess how many years it took him to complete it? Three! It began as a watercolor – a type of painting that Homer was very fond of – and was finished as an oil painting. One of his friends liked the painting and very much wanted to buy it, but Homer told him to wait. "I am about to paint much better pictures."

Remember our "Elements of Composition" visual? What kind of LINES do you see in this painting? Do you think the painting looks balanced? Why or why not?

What can you say about the COLORS in this painting? Are the sky and the ocean all one color?

Where do you see LIGHT and SHADOW in this painting? Can you point out any TEXTURE in this painting? (*For younger kids, you may need to demonstrate texture. Bring out the red bag that contains different pieces of material. Can you see how they are different?*)

Which of the two boats in the picture is the largest? Count the sails. (*The background boat is bigger.*) Have one volunteer student come to the front and stand back a bit. Have the students measure with their thumb and forefinger the size of the student's head. Is your helper's head only as big as the distance between your fingers? No, it only looks that way. When our helper moves closer to you, what happens? Does the space between your fingers grow? What does our experiment tell you about the way things look that are far away? (*They look smaller*) This is called "perspective."

What about colors? Is there a difference between colors that are close and colors that are far away? In "Breezing Up" where does the sky meet the ocean? Do you know what we call that line where the earth or sea meets the sky? (*The horizon line*)

Let's see if we agree with Homer when he said his paintings were going to get better. Homer had many opportunities to paint in different settings throughout his life. Let's first look at some of his Civil War paintings that he did for Harper's Weekly. (*Show "The Briarwood Pipe" and "Prisoners from the Front"*)

After the war ended, he returned to New York and continued to work as an illustrator and painted a series of works of children, rural scenes and country life. (*Show "Snap the Whip" in both sketch form and the print on cardboard, and "Fog Warning" and "The Bridle Path" cardboard prints*) "Breezing Up" comes from this same group of paintings.

Homer's style changed dramatically when he was hired by Century Magazine to do freelance sketches of Nassau in the Bahamas as a way to increase tourism. What difference do you notice in these paintings? (*Colors are brighter, brush strokes are bolder*) Show "Salt Kettle: Bermuda" and "Flower Garden and Bungalow, Bermuda" These paintings are some of his most famous, along with the seascapes and landscapes he did in Canada and along the coast of Maine. Show "Canoe in Rapids" and "Winter Coast" and "Gathering Autumn Leaves" Which of these different genres do you like best? His Civil War, Children and Rural Scenes, Bahamas, or Seascapes and Landscapes?

Homer died of a stroke in 1910 just as his reputation as a brilliant watercolorist was beginning to be established. He never married and chose to live a rather solitary life along the coast of Maine in his house on the cliffs. Unlike many artists we study in FAME, he was actually quite famous, and his works were popular, while he was alive. They became even more so after his death and today is considered one of the best American painters ever. His paintings hang on many museum walls and galleries where we can admire his wonderful deep blues, silvery and iridescent grays, and luminous skies.