

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
**PRESS PREVIEW: TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1986
10 a.m.-1 p.m.

EXHIBITION OF WATERCOLORS AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
CELEBRATES THE 150th ANNIVERSARY OF WINSLOW HOMER'S BIRTH

WASHINGTON, D.C. December 16, 1985. To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the birth of Winslow Homer (1836-1910), an exhibition of approximately 100 of the American artist's finest watercolors opens at the National Gallery of Art's West Building on March 2, 1986 and remains on view until May 11, 1986.

In announcing the Homer exhibition, J. Carter Brown, Director of the National Gallery, states:

"Unquestionably, Winslow Homer is now viewed as one of America's greatest artists. This exhibition will certainly confirm his own assertion that one day he would be best known for his watercolors. They are a sublime achievement in the medium, and our visitors are in for a special treat."

Winslow Homer Watercolors, the first major survey devoted exclusively to the artist's work in this medium, is supported by a generous grant from the IBM Corporation.

Chosen from 60 public and private collections throughout the United States on the grounds of their exceptional quality, these watercolors constitute the largest selection ever brought to public view.

The exhibition demonstrates Homer's extraordinary mastery of the watercolor technique, his absolute command of design elements, and his use of light to describe both the physical world and his emotional response to it. It also reveals the full range of his imagery, from the idyllic rural

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Homer...add one

pleasures depicted in his early works to the moving reflections on mortality which characterize his later production. These assembled works make it clear that Homer first turned to new subjects, themes and experimental techniques in this medium.

Essentially self-taught, Homer was a brilliant as well as prolific watercolorist---nearly 700 works by his hand are known. These sheets, executed over a 30 year period from 1873 to 1905, reveal an intensely private and lyrical vision seldom matched in Homer's work in oils. In Homer's watercolors, arguably still unsurpassed in their immediacy, luminosity and power to evoke nature, the medium reached great expressive heights.

As a boy in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Homer was introduced to watercolor by his mother, a gifted amateur. Yet it was not until 1873, the first of several summers spent at nearby Gloucester, that he began to work seriously in the medium. By this date, Homer was 37 years old, already an acknowledged illustrator and painter.

Among the early watercolors on view, many of which consist of single washes broadly applied to quick graphite underdrawing, several depict the boats and pounding surf Homer encountered either on the Massachusetts shore or during his first visit to Prout's Neck, Maine, in 1875 (Sailing the Catboat, probably 1875). Also from the 1870s is a series of vibrant pastorales, each depicting the life and pursuits of children and countryfolk (Fresh Eggs, 1874; Rustic Courtship, 1874; On the Hill, 1878). Although these images convey human and atmospheric warmth, there is nonetheless an underlying mood of melancholy and introspection ever present in Homer's vision of the world.

To the summer of 1880, when Homer again returned to Gloucester, belongs a series of extraordinary sunset seascapes far removed in spirit and

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Homer...add two

handling from the more illustrative watercolors he had executed there in 1873. Painted in assured and summary strokes, these images of sailboats silhouetted against a dying sun are among the most dazzling and haunting watercolors Homer ever produced (Sunset Fires, 1880; and Gloucester Sunset, 1880).

Another group of watercolors, executed during or immediately after the twenty months ---in 1881 and 1882---that Homer spent in England on the rugged North Sea coast at Cullercoats, crystallize the serious and thoughtful character of his mature work. Often in these highly finished and ambitious works, lone robust fisherfolk stand resilient against a brooding sky and tumultuous sea (Fisherwoman, probably 1882). These are images of endurance, of human strength inseparable from nature's own powerful forces.

Such metaphors for the elemental, for the life and death struggle in all creation, were to occupy Homer for the remainder of his life. Whether from the vantage point of the rocky ledges of Prout's Neck, Maine, where he made his home from 1884 onward; the dappled, wooded lakes of the Adirondacks, (Adirondack Guide, 1894); Cape Hatteras (Diamond Shoal, 1905); or from the more exotic locales of the Florida Keys or the Caribbean (After the Hurricane, 1899), these are the familiar themes to which his ever more fluid and summary brush repeatedly returned.

Helen A. Cooper, the curator of American Painting and Sculpture at the Yale University Art Gallery, and well-known scholar of Homer watercolors, has organized the exhibition and has written the book which accompanies it. The National Gallery is unusually fortunate in having on its staff two distinguished Homer scholars, who have also contributed to the organization of the exhibition: Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr., curator of American Art at the Gallery and co-ordinator of the exhibition in Washington, is the author of numerous articles as well as a forthcoming book on Homer; and John

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Homer...add three

Wilmerding, deputy director of the National Gallery, a noted Americanist and the author of a monograph on the artist.

Ms. Cooper's book, the first major survey of Homer's watercolor career, is being co-published with Yale University Press, New Haven and London. It is fully illustrated with 134 color plates and 89 black and white illustrations.

After its premiere at the National Gallery of Art, Winslow Homer Watercolors will be seen at the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas (June 6-July 27, 1986) and at the Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut (Sept. 11-Nov. 2, 1986).

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Neill Heath, Catherine Freedberg, Randall Kremer or Ellen Stanley, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565 (202) 842-6353.