

WILLIAM BLAKE, WINSLOW HOMER, AND THE LONG CIVIL WAR

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Washington Crossing the Delaware | Emanuel Leutze | 1851



Sharpshooter | Winslow Homer | 1863

How to paint the war: this was the urgent question contemporary artists, critics, and viewers grappled with during and after the years of bloody and bitter conflict between North and South. Critics complained that for the most part, American painters seemed to continue on just as they had during the antebellum decades, favoring untarnished landscapes and entertaining scenes of daily life over renderings of heroic or tragic exploits on the battlefield. In fact, a significant number of artists *did* paint incidents of the war, but their efforts for the most part fell flat.

As many have noted, European-style “history painting”—meaning those commandingly large, dramatic, and idealized spectacles of

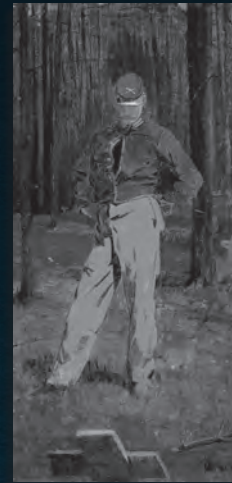
victorious battles and their heroes—had failed to gain much traction in the antebellum United States. Indeed, during the Civil War itself, Emanuel Leutze’s monumental history painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (exhibited at the 1864 Metropolitan Fair in New York) prompted one writer to dismiss the work as “a striking representation of the school that is dying out.” Some, however, particularly the critic Eugene Benson, had a different and more challenging perspective on the subject. American historical art, Benson argued, should be “art that shall become historical, not art that is intended to be so.” Historical art, in other words, was contemporary art.

Benson's friend Winslow Homer was one of the few who rose to that challenge. Already an up-and-coming observer of the American scene for popular illustrated magazines, Homer traveled three times to the battlefield as an artist-reporter for *Harper's Weekly* and composed lively and often humorous scenes of camp life derived from sketches he made on the spot. Ambitious to become a full-fledged artist, he translated a number of his Civil War drawings and illustrations into easel paintings. Some sustained the relatively lighthearted mood of the artist's graphic

and haunting impact. In November 1865, he exhibited *Veteran in a New Field*, in which a demobilized soldier, back to the viewer, army jacket and canteen lying nearby, toils at mowing down a wall of golden wheat under a clear blue sky, his scythe evoking that of the Grim Reaper. In the same year, Homer created *Trooper Meditating beside a Grave*, portraying another anonymous soldier, still in uniform, standing in a forest and gazing down at a wooden cross marking the burial place of some unknown, perhaps a comrade. We have no access to this soldier's



The Veteran in a New Field | Winslow Homer | 1865



Trooper Meditating Beside a Grave | Winslow Homer | 1865

output, but others ventured deeply into the severity of the war's toll on people and nature alike.

The Sharpshooter, Homer's very first effort in that line, set the tone. Unlike conventional history paintings, it is intimate in scale, propelling us into close proximity with the anonymous shooter taking a bead on an unseen target from a precarious pine-tree perch. Much later, Homer revealed the horror he had felt in observing the actions of Union sharpshooters: to him they were, in essence, murderers. It was not until the war's end, though, that Homer began to reckon with its profound

thoughts, but his partially unbuttoned jacket reveals a dark void suggestive of sadness—or emptiness.

In none of these works did Homer depict actual violence, yet the sense of it is inescapable. We see no explicit carnage in *Prisoners from the Front*, either. Instead, Homer encoded the war's savagery in the lifeless landscape of shattered tree trunks, extending as far as we can see on the battlefield where Brigadier General Francis Channing Barlow confronts three Confederate captives. The first, a dashing cavalier, glares defiantly at his captor; the other two—a tattered old man and a youth wearing a hat

perforated by bullet holes—look on apprehensively. Behind, the troops and their horses quietly stand; there is a slight breeze, but otherwise all is still. What will happen next? Of course in hindsight—even in 1866—the ultimate outcome of the war is written into history. But in Homer’s telling, that history has not come to an end: it is ongoing.

Thus, Homer’s paintings seem not to belong only to the past but to live in the present. The artist’s genius lay in his refusal to deliver

viewer to consider what led up to this moment, and asks us to ponder the cost of victory.

William Blake’s paintings in “A Great Battlefield” channel the spirit of Winslow Homer’s war imagery into our own contemporary world. Hardly imitations, and much more than echoes, Blake’s portrayals, muted and grave, prompt us to dwell on the long-ago war that has yet to release its hold on memory and imagination. Blake modeled his



Prisoners from the Front | Winslow Homer | 1866



Blake with Marines at Gettysburg | Anthony Coplan | 2020

easy, or any, narrative closure. Instead, his Civil War works induce us, compel us, even, to contemplate the ambiguous meaning or meanings the artist inscribed in his tableaux of the war. The *Veteran in a New Field* is an unknown quantity; we cannot even see his face. What did he do in the old field, the battlefield? What happened to him? Is he a hero? Or, like *The Sharpshooter*, is he, or was he, a murderer? Does he bear the burden of some indelible trauma precipitated by the disasters of war? What does he remember, and what is he trying to forget? What does his future hold? So too does *Prisoners from the Front* leave us hanging: there is confrontation but no resolution. Homer instead prompts the

representations of the 1922 Marines’ reenactment of Pickett’s Charge on the US Marine Corps Historical Company’s reenactment of that reenactment in 2020. Thus, these scenes take place at several removes from the Civil War—a fact the artist does not attempt to obfuscate. We see commemorative monuments in the distance; the men’s uniforms date from the early twentieth century; the Marine posing as a corpse in *Good Friday* wears a wristwatch. Yet Blake’s renderings bring the conflict vividly before us, not as bloody battles but as stilled moments for somber reflection. The Civil War haunts us to this day: its long shadow has not lifted from the land. ■