

MASTERWORKS OF
AMERICAN PAINTING
AT THE DE YOUNG

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41. WINSLOW HOMER, *The Bright Side*

TRUTH AND HUMOR

Of the three paintings Winslow Homer (1836–1910) exhibited at the National Academy of Design's *Fortieth Annual Exhibition* in New York in 1865, critics found *The Bright Side* his strongest, noting the merit of both its execution and its subject matter.¹ The critic for *The Evening Post* wrote:

In the works of Winslow Homer we have a direct style and faithful observation of nature. The best example of Mr. Homer's talent is that called "Bright Side," a picture . . . representing a group of negro mule-drivers dozing on the sunny side of an army-tent. There is in this work a dry, latent humor, and vigorous emphasis of character; and the episode of camp-life is told in a manly way.²

Praise for Homer's ability to render a scene truthfully strikes a familiar chord today because of Homer's reputation as one of the great American realist painters. The critic's observation of the "latent humor" in *The Bright Side* is perhaps more puzzling, as we rarely think of Homer as an artist who depicted humorous subjects. And yet in 1865 this critic was not the only one who saw humor in the painting.³ Keeping in mind that these critics were all white men, what exactly did white Americans living in New York in 1865 find humorous about *The Bright Side*?

Winslow Homer was born into a wealthy Boston family who encouraged and supported his artistic interests.⁴ Between 1855 and 1857 he apprenticed to a lithographer in Boston, creating images for commercial publications such as sheet music. Although he later claimed that he loathed this work, by the time his apprenticeship had ended he was a confident and accomplished draftsman. Indeed, the year his apprenticeship ended, he began contributing illustra-

tions of contemporary life to popular magazines and soon was regularly freelancing for one of the nation's premier publications, *Harper's Weekly*. In 1859 Homer moved to New York City to be closer to the main office of *Harper's* as well as to take advantage of the many opportunities available there to study art. He enrolled in life class at the National Academy of Design and apprenticed himself to a local painter. When the Civil War began in April 1861, *Harper's* appointed him an "artist-correspondent" to the Army of the Potomac, and over the next few years Homer witnessed life in the Union Army firsthand. Many of the sketches he made served as the basis for illustrations published in *Harper's*, but toward the end of the war Homer also used them for his own paintings, including *The Bright Side*, which occupies an important place in Homer's career, as it marks his transition from illustrator to professional painter. The painting's subject and relatively small size suggest it is something akin to a painted illustration, but in terms of style, it points to Homer's future as one of the great realist painters of the nineteenth century.⁵

In 1865 critics could have seen *The Bright Side* as a "faithful observation of nature" in part because Homer's subject corresponded to familiar aspects of army life. During the Civil War both free blacks from the North and escaped slaves from the South (known as "contrabands") served as mule drivers in the Union Army quartermaster's corps, which was responsible for moving the army's supplies, including all the materiel needed to set up camp.⁶ Significantly, Homer represented these men not as they drive their wagons through enemy gunfire but as they rest while awaiting orders to move camp elsewhere. Soldiers of all rank, position, and ethnicity who served in both the Union and



41. Winslow Homer (1836–1910), *The Bright Side*, 1865
Oil on canvas, 12 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 17 in. (32.4 × 43.2 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, 1979.7.56



Fig. 41.1. William Sidney Mount (1807–1868), *Farmers Nooning*, 1836. Oil on canvas, 20 × 24 in. (50.8 × 61 cm). The Long Island Museum of American Art, History, and Carriages, Stony Brook, New York. Gift of Frederick Sturges Jr., 1954

Confederate armies spent much of their time idle, waiting for something to happen. At the beginning of the war one Union soldier complained: “We left home full of fight. . . . For two months we drilled steadily, patiently waiting the expected orders which never came but to be countermanded. We have now come to the conclusion that we will have no chance, and we are waiting in sullen silence and impatience for the expiration of our time.”⁷ This soldier’s frustration may have stemmed in part from the fact that his experience contradicted the images of warfare he had seen, such as in traditional history paintings, which celebrated war as a grand and heroic affair. In contrast, Homer’s *The*

Bright Side would have seemed “real” precisely because it was a genre scene and thus corresponded more closely with the reality of warfare described by soldiers in their letters home.

The veracity in Homer’s subject is also conveyed by the way in which Homer rendered it. He executed the work in a linear rather than painterly style, reinforcing its reportorial nature. This style in turn enabled him to represent each man with a distinct physiognomy, suggesting Homer carefully observed specific African American individuals in preparation for this painting.⁸ Homer then arranged the composition so that the viewer seems to share the camp

with these men. By placing the dozing men and their tent in the foreground and tilting the ground plane up behind them, it feels as if we are standing only a few feet from this resting group. Then, as we stand observing the scene before us, one of the mule drivers pokes his head out of the tent flap and stares at us. His glare makes us feel like intruders, potentially disrupting his and his friends' rest. But it is precisely his penetrating gaze that acknowledges our presence and further connects us to the scene.

Although *The Bright Side* appears to be an accurate portrayal of camp life, the critics who attributed humor to it did so because they saw it as representing a nineteenth-century stereotype about black Americans. One critic stated, "The lazy sunlight, the lazy, nodding donkeys, the lazy, lolling negroes, make a humorously conceived and truthfully executed picture."⁹ In his analysis of representations of black Americans by white artists, the art historian Michael Harris reminds us, "Despite the real-world impact of the construction of a black racial identity and its derogatory imagery, it is important to recognize it as what it is: a construction, an invention."¹⁰ Thus, when white critics saw the resting teamsters in Homer's painting as behaving humorously, they were responding to a construction, a white invention of black identity, which in this case had been created and reified through artistic conventions.

The representation of black men at rest in the sun in *The Bright Side* calls to mind William Sidney Mount's 1836 *Farmers Nooning* (fig. 41.1), a painting that also depicts a black man relaxing in the sun. Mount's painting shows four farmers and a boy taking a break on a sunny afternoon. Even though the subject is rendered in a naturalistic style, this genre scene is a fiction; the figures represent stereotypes, their identity made visible by their contrasting behavior. The white farmer to the left spends his free time preparing for the future by sanding a scythe sharpener. In contrast, the black farmer sleeps on top of a haycock. In the context of abolitionist debates raging at the time Mount executed his

painting, some Northern viewers would have interpreted this black figure's behavior as suggesting that even if blacks had the same opportunities as whites—that is, even if they were free—they would choose not to work because they were inherently lazy.¹¹ Nearly thirty years later, critics who saw *The Bright Side* recognized this established pictorial convention and interpreted it as referencing a stereotype of black male behavior. Although neither Homer nor Mount had sinister intentions, their paintings did have implications for the real world because, as Harris notes, the ultimate power of such paintings is that "they naturalized a social order with black subjects . . . exhibiting stereotypical behavior so as to emphasize their social and political inferiority."¹²

Yet the title Homer gave to this painting, *The Bright Side*, suggests he might have been calling into question the truthfulness of this stereotype. The title suggests an awkward pun on the fact that these black men rest on the bright (sunny) side of the tent. However, dressed in their dark blue uniforms, which absorbed the heat, they must have been uncomfortable, especially if it were a hot, muggy day in Virginia, and thus perhaps they are not experiencing unmitigated, lazy pleasure. Homer and his peers would have known that black soldiers fought as courageously as white soldiers, as the history of the Massachusetts Fifty-fourth Regiment, for example, famously attested. Traveling with the Army of the Potomac, Homer would have also known that labor performed by mule drivers was essential for the success of the Union Army. Moreover, black soldiers were often assigned more onerous duties than their white counterparts, for which they were paid less.¹³ Executed at the end of the Civil War, when the antebellum social order was about to be transformed, *The Bright Side* perhaps accurately encodes the uncertainty and ambivalence many white Americans felt about the prospects for an integrated society.

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41. WINSLOW HOMER, *The Bright Side*

1. Homer also exhibited *Pitching Quits* (1865, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University) and *The Initials* (1864, private collection).

2. "National Academy of Design. Fortieth Annual Exhibition. Concluding Article," *Evening Post*, 31 May 1865, quoted in Marc Simpson,

Winslow Homer: Paintings of the Civil War (San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and Bedford Arts, 1988), 206.

3. For example, the critic for the *Albion* noted: "Good drawing and a broad sense of humour characterize this production." "Fine Arts. The National Academy of Design. Third Notice," *Albion* 43, no. 21 (27 May 1865): 249, quoted in *ibid.*, 206.

4. Homer's mother, an accomplished watercolorist, was undoubtedly instrumental in his early artistic development, and although he would later produce stunning watercolors, early in his career Homer focused on mastering his draftsmanship. His father was a businessman, but he too encouraged young Winslow by presenting him with a gift of a drawing manual and later arranging for him to apprentice with a Boston lithographer. Nicolai Cikovsky addresses Homer's early artistic training and the significance of his Civil War experiences in his artistic development in Nicolai Cikovsky Jr. and Franklin Kelly, *Winslow Homer* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1995), 17–37. For a year-by-year chronology of Homer's life, see *ibid.*, 391–406. For a detailed chronology of Homer's life during the Civil War, see Simpson, *Homer: Paintings*, 16–23.

5. Homer's merit and future potential did not go unnoticed in the spring of 1865. A critic for the *New-York Daily Tribune* observed, "If he [Homer] shall paint every picture with the loyalty to nature and the faithful study that marks this little square of canvas, he will become one of the men we must have crowned when the Academy gets officers that have a right to bestow crowns. Meanwhile, the public crowns the best chronicler of the war, so far, with smiling eye and silent applause." "National Academy of Design," *New-York Daily Tribune*, 3 July 1865, quoted in *ibid.*, 206. In addition, Homer was elected a full academician in the National Academy of Design in May 1865, no doubt in large part based on the artistic merit of *The Bright Side*; *ibid.*, 47.

6. In 1863 General Order No. 6 sought to recruit blacks in the Union Army; *ibid.*, 60 n. 29.

7. Oliver Wilcox Norton, "14 July, 1861," in *Army Letters, 1861–1865: Being Extracts from Private Letters to Relatives and Friends from a Soldier in the Field during the Late Civil War, with an Appendix Containing Copies of Some Official Documents, Papers and Addresses of Later Date* (Chicago: O. L. Denning, 1903), 355. From *The American Civil War: Letters and Diaries*, Alexander Street Press, <http://www.alexanderstreetz.com/CWLDlive/index.html> (accessed 30 October 2004).

8. In an 1866 article, T. B. Aldrich stated that Homer attempted to recruit an African American who lived near his studio to model for him. According to Aldrich, this man mistakenly thought the artist was an army surgeon intent on operating on him and thus ran from Homer's studio. T. B. Aldrich, "Among the Studios," *Our Young Folks: An Illustrated Magazine for Boys and Girls* 2, no. 6 (July 1866): 396–397. Extant sketches and preparatory paintings for *The Bright Side* are illustrated in Simpson, *Homer: Paintings*, 200, 202, 204.

9. "National Academy of Design. Seventh Article," *Watson's Weekly Art Journal* 3, no. 10 (1 July 1865): 148–149, quoted in Simpson, *Homer: Paintings*, 206. For an assessment of the humor attributed to Homer's painting, see Marc Simpson, "The Bright Side: 'Humorously Conceived and Truthfully Executed,'" in *ibid.*, 47–63.

10. Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 15.

11. See Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 33–38.

12. Harris, *Colored Pictures*, 40.

13. For a discussion of black soldiers assigned excessive work detail, see Keith P. Wilson, *Campfires of Freedom: The Camp Life of Black Soldiers During the Civil War* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2002), 38–44. On issues of equal pay for black soldiers, see *ibid.*, 44–58.