

## 27: Winslow Homer *The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon Fog* (1894)

David Talham

In 1894, a decade after he had left New York City to settle at Prout's Neck on the coast of Maine, Winslow Homer painted a striking view of his studio-home. He cast the building into silhouette, enveloping it in a hazily incandescent, gold-gray, midday fog. He placed the obscured sun directly over the building, as though to suggest that a kind of divine providence favored his home. By situating the building at the center of his composition, he left little doubt that it was also at the center of his existence. It had been his home and workplace since 1884 and it would remain so for the rest of his life. After a residence of twenty-six years, he would die in this building in 1910.<sup>1</sup>

Homer's studio-abode (which survives little changed) and his painted depiction of it share an interesting history. The structure was originally a carriage house for the seaside cottage whose large shadowy form appears at left in the painting. Homer's father and older brother Charles built the cottage in 1882–83 as a summer residence not only for themselves and their wives, but also for the unmarried Winslow.<sup>2</sup> The young Portland architect, John Calvin Stevens, who designed the building, included on the second floor a north-facing studio for Winslow, who was then in the middle of a twenty-month stay in England.<sup>3</sup>

At some point soon after his return to the United States late in 1882, Homer chose to make Prout's Neck his permanent residence rather than a summer retreat. With his family's consent, he moved the carriage house to an adjacent lot and commissioned Stevens to convert it into a home and studio suitable for year-round occupancy. Stevens accomplished this with great skill and sensitivity,



Winslow Homer,  
1836–1910

*The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon  
Fog*, 1894

Oil on canvas, 24 x 30¼ in.

R.T. Miller Fund, 41.32



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*The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon  
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creating a building of spartan but elegant simplicity. He added a stoutly bracketed, ocean-facing balcony and extended the building's mansard roof over it. Homer settled into his new home in 1884 and from his balcony began his study of the sea and its eternal contest with the shore. Six years later he gained more studio space when his brother Charles commissioned Stevens to add a painting room to the building. In *The Artist's Studio* Homer gives slightly sharper definition to the balcony and the painting room (through its stovepipe chimney) than to the rest of the building, perhaps to intimate the importance of these additions to the original structure.

In 1901, Stevens designed Kettle Cove, a rental cottage for Homer at Prout's Neck. As had been true with the conversion of the carriage house, the two men worked closely on the plan.<sup>4</sup> When Stevens submitted his bill for the job, he asked not for a sum of money but rather for a painting of Homer's choosing. Homer's reply leaves no doubt that he held Stevens and his work in high regard. He wrote: "I am very much surprised and pleased at your bill. This kind of thing occurs seldom in matters of business. The interest that you have shown in this cottage of mine, and the valuable time that you have given to it in your busy season, and your success in producing it, shows me that I can greet you as a brother artist. And, thanking you sincerely, I send you this sketch of mine that I think is appropriate and will please you."<sup>5</sup>

The "sketch" was in fact a finished oil painting. Stevens must have known it well. Homer had displayed it in his studio for seven years, calling it *My Studio in an Afternoon Fog*.<sup>6</sup> It was typical of Homer's dry humor to characterize this work as "a sketch" even though, as he knew, it displayed his powers as a painter in full measure. Later, in a letter to a friend, he referred to it as "a great work."<sup>7</sup>

A year following Stevens's death in 1940, the Memorial Art Gallery purchased the painting from his children. The dealer who handled the sale wrote to the museum's director, Gertrude Herdle Moore, that "the family of the late Mr. John Calvin Stevens feel very happy that [the painting] is now placed in its permanent home and so suitably and beautifully displayed."<sup>8</sup> Only at that point, nearly half a century after its creation, did *The Artist's Studio* take its place in the public mind as one of the masterworks of Homer's maturity.

The painting is unique in the complexity of its autobiographical content. It depicts the place where Homer resided contentedly in solitude, yet it also includes the Ark, where throughout each summer he communed regularly with members of his family.<sup>9</sup> It shows the Homers' buildings safe and secure on level ground, but places them at the edge of an unstable world of slippery ledges and churning water. It sets the planar, smoothly modulated, scrim-like upper half of the composition with its precise, jigsaw outline of buildings and shrubbery against a boldly brushed, impasto-laden lower half of



receding space, cyclopean rock, and white-crested water. A dark band of ledge powers its way diagonally across the lower half of the canvas to tie together contrasts of space, tension, texture, and tone.

The painting is one of several oils from the 1890s in which Homer adopted the limited palette and muted color of American tonalism, but he used those qualities in works invested with a very untonalist level of dynamic energy.<sup>10</sup> The monochromatic flatness of the upper part of the painting may reflect the influence of

Winslow Homer Studio,  
Prout's Neck, Maine  
Exterior side with rock  
Courtesy Meyersphoto.com

Japanese landscape art (with whose traditions many American artists had become acquainted by the 1870s), though in an enabling rather than an imitative way.<sup>11</sup> *The Artist's Studio* also perpetuates something of the sense of wonderment and awe in nature that had characterized American landscape painting since the 1820s, yet with a newer, Darwinian, sense of constant struggle. Still, despite these and other possible influences from the world of art, Homer's vision and pictorial intellect are here, as everywhere in his work, uniquely his own. He trusted instinct and intuition in art more than styles and trends. A critic for *The Boston Transcript* wrote in 1899, "We watch Winslow Homer's work from season to season without being able to observe in it any trace or reflection of what other painters have done or thought."<sup>12</sup>

With an increasingly individualistic style, and a studio well-removed from centers of art production, Homer had gained a reputation as a distinctly independent figure among American artists. The spirit of solitude, even isolation, that pervades his portrait of his studio-home echoed the reality of his status in his profession. Great works would continue to come from this studio on Prout's Neck, but none quite so personal as *The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon Fog*.

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