

The Fruits of Their Labors

Theodore Barrow



Picture Winslow Homer in this watercolor. Not just as the *author* or the watercolor, but also the *subject*.



Winslow Homer visited the Bahamas in the winter of 1884-85, boarding a Ward Line steamship down at Wall Street in New York, and three days later disembarking at Nassau.



He traveled with his father. Homer would turn 49 the following February, in Cuba.



The middle of three brothers, he was the only artist, the only not to marry, and the only son whose business prospects remained shaky throughout his life....



Prior to his trip, the increasing anxiety of the art marketplace and the compromised role that the unmarried, homebound, and caretaking watercolorist must have felt was manifest in his focus on robust, albeit imperiled, women of the sea.



His trip to the Bahamas was taken the very year that his mother, Henrietta Benson Homer, with whom Homer not only shared a resemblance, but who was also a watercolorist, died.



Staying at a luxury hotel on the island, Homer chose primarily to depict the lives of black Bahamians who lived around Fox Hill in Nassau.



He painted their huts, but he also painted the motif of a solitary black figure, usually feminine, sometimes a child, walking along a road, along the right side of which runs a wall and an abundant garden.



He did this a lot.



While it was a fairly typical (and unfortunate) trope of white American artists to depict the squalid and meager lives of people of color in the 19th century, Homer's approach is different.



And one wonders why.



Sure, there remains an unflinching acceptance of the harsh lives of these oceanic people on the part of Homer, but did Homer see his lot as very different?



Homer made his name as an artist of the Civil War, and his most biting and ambitious subjects focused on the lives of African Americans in the wake of reconstruction.



Here Homer seems to be joining a long line of American artists in exploring the relationship between black and white, often in water.

Ishmael and Queequeg, Huck and Jim, the American racial imagination of the 19th century curiously paired black and white in water.



Could these black women and children laboring in the shade of a palm (whose bounties they do not enjoy) be Homer's trenchant assertion of his own precarious place as an artist?

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The bright tropical colors of his watercolors, often depicting the tropical fruits sold by the women, offer a Realist allegory of the New England feminized artist as a Bahamian market lady.

During this time, Homer turned more aggressively towards marketing his watercolors through dealer-sponsored exhibitions in Boston and New York instead of hoping to sell them through bi-annual art exhibitions.



His sponge-sellers mine the sea for tourist trinkets in an activity that, like Homer's watercolors, connects medium to place and intent.



While earlier artists painted the tropics as a place of regeneration, the palm trees promising Edenic rebirth, Homer countermands this fantasy.



Instead, he focuses on the exclusion of these children from the garden of paradise.

Notice this shape here: evidence that Homer decided to scrape out two figures who may have been climbing over the wall to steal coconuts.



→While we cannot be certain about his reasons for removing them, their ghostly trace further isolates the child who gazes at the high wall in helpless frustration.



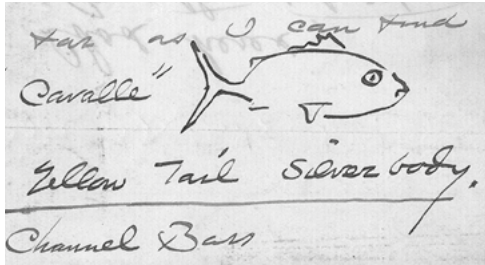
What might the abundance of the tropical garden mean in the context of Homer's speculative watercolor subject?



What might the solitary figure mean to Homer, who had just lost his mother?



As Homer aged, he referred to his art-making as “business,” and often correlated the prices of his watercolors to their subject.



In one letter, he compares a fish to a “\$20 silver coin.” At the time, he was selling his watercolors, of fish, for \$20.



His late marines in oil seem to recreate something of the rugged sea in their viscous impasto.



So too do his watercolors function as paper currency. Of water.



His Bahamian watercolors painted in 1885 are about the precarious place held by the artist in the market between abundance and poverty, thematized through an inverse self-portrait as his tropical Other, placing currency as the central subject and medium that transformed him into his surrogate subject.