

[For the April issue]

ART APPRECIATION GROUP – Report by Tony Seward

The American Realist painter Winslow Homer was the subject of our March meeting - very big in the States but not so well known here, there being no works by him in British public collections. This lack was largely redressed by a major exhibition at the National Gallery in 2022. As a result, there is now more awareness, not only of his work in New England and the Caribbean, but of a strong English connection – his two-year stay in Cullercoats, near Tynemouth. We viewed a full-length lecture from the curator, and a supplementary talk which included an interview with a descendant of one of the fisherwomen who modelled for him at Cullercoats.

Homer began as an illustrator for magazines, especially of scenes from the Civil War (1861-5). This gave him a solid grounding in realism, prompting him to develop a strongly concentrated style, stripped of all inessentials. He is probably best loved for his depictions of sturdy, Huck Finn-type American boys, playing and relaxing in the great outdoors, but he never loses sight of the more sombre realities, in particular slavery and the aftermath of the Civil War.



Snap the Whip

He was also developing a monumental treatment of themes suggested by humanity's struggle with nature – storms, shipwrecks, rocky shorelines, crashing waves. He was attracted to Cullercoats by the hard lives of the fisherfolk, and in particular by the actions of the lifeboat brigade. These gave him images which on his return to the US he worked up into powerful tributes to the heroism of ordinary people in the face of adversity.



Inside the Bar

Late in his career he discovered the brilliant colours and light of the Caribbean, completely changing his palette to evoke its lush vegetation and teeming seas. Even so, he continued to treat the darker themes that were central to his vision: man's inhumanity to man, and the pitilessness of nature. These culminated in what many regard as his crowning achievement: *The Gulf Stream* depicts a lone negro on a wrecked boat in a storm, surrounded by sharks, with only a few sticks of sugar cane for sustenance. Here the influence of Turner's *Slave Ship* is unmistakable.



The Gulf Stream

Next up - Wednesday 3 April: Women artists - Part 1 The Pioneers: Artemisia Gentileschi, Angelica Kauffman, Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun. Looking further ahead, on 1st May Caroline Chapman will join us to talk about her new book *A Place Apert. The Artist's Studio 1400-1900*.