

## 25: Winslow Homer *Paddling at Dusk* (1892)

David Talham

Winslow Homer's long association with the Adirondacks began in 1870 and ended only with his death in 1910. He visited this heavily forested region of northern New York primarily to fish and to enjoy the company of other sportsmen and their families, but for many years he also took along his painting gear. From these visits came several oils and more than a hundred watercolors, including *Paddling at Dusk*.<sup>1</sup>

Homer's preferred Adirondack locale was a forest clearing with rustic buildings in the Essex County township of Minerva. He found subjects in the local folk, fellow sportsmen, and the surround of woods, water, and low mountains. He depicted trappers, hunters, woodsmen, and guides, all of whom he knew and respected, showing them at work or resting from their labors. He also painted fly fishermen who, like himself, had come to the Adirondacks in search of an angler's paradise.

*Paddling at Dusk* differs from these Adirondack works in its singular subject. The figure who paddles toward the heavy foliage of the nearby shore is neither a local woodsman nor an active angler, but rather a well-dressed young man demonstrating the worthiness of a small lightweight canoe. He was



J. Ernest G. Yalden, a twenty-two year old engineering student at New York University who had himself built the canoe. Homer knew Yalden and his parents—they all belonged to the Adirondack Preserve Association. This organization (which in 1895 renamed itself the North Woods Club) had acquired the Minerva clearing, its buildings, and five thousand acres of woodland spotted with lakes and ponds.<sup>2</sup>

In 1936, forty-four years after Homer had rendered the scene, Yalden prepared an account of how and why the artist had painted him and his boat. He wrote:

*Paddling at Dusk...was painted some time during the summer of 1892. Mr. Homer and myself were members of the Adirondack Preserve Association at the time; and this picture was made at Mink Pond on the preserve. It is a canoe built by myself which interested Mr. Homer on account of its portability for it weighed only 32 lbs. He was particularly interested in the broad flashes of light from the paddle when underway after dark; and this picture was painted when it was almost dark. The canoe built of mahogany was based on the model of a Canadian bateau, was 12 [feet] long, and 18 inches beam. It has always been a puzzle to me how he was able to get the effect he did when it was almost too dark to distinguish one color from another. I have a number of interesting photographs of Homer that I made when with him [at the club] for several summers....<sup>3</sup>*



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:

After Winslow Homer,

1836–1910

*Camping Out in the Adirondack*

*Mountains*, 1874

(published in *Harper's Weekly*,

November 7, 1874)

Wood engraving, 9 1/8 x 13 1/8 in.

Gift of Howard and Florence

Merritt, 86.69

Winslow Homer,

1836–1910

*Paddling at Dusk*, 1892 (detail)

Watercolor with graphite

on wove paper, 15 1/8 x 21 7/8 in.

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. James

H. Lockhart, Jr., 84.51



As an ardent sport fisherman well acquainted with the need for frequent overland carries from lake to lake in the Adirondacks, Homer naturally took interest in a light-weight canoe. As an admirer of skill in woodworking, he doubtless found this handcrafted boat worthy of his attention. But neither of these considerations would have moved him to paint the scene. Yalden was undoubtedly correct in recalling that what interested Homer more than anything else on this occasion was the nature of the local light at dusk—the ebbing of clarity and color and the darting reflection of what little light remained on the moving paddle and the bobbing water.

Yalden wondered how Homer had managed to capture the effects of color and light when it was nearly dark. The answer surely has something to do with Homer's sharp visual memory but it has even more to do with the fact that he typically devoted two quite different painting sessions to the creation of a watercolor. On the evening of Yalden's demonstration, Homer with very few lines sketched the figure and the boat lightly in graphite and then added local color. With broader, more vigorous strokes he captured the water's action. He began the background with freer washes. He accomplished these things in late evening on a date between June 18 and July 28, the period when both he and the Yaldens were at the preserve.<sup>4</sup>

On the 29th Homer returned to his studio-home at Prout's Neck on the coast of Maine. (See essay 27.) In the good light and the superior working conditions of his studio, he turned again to the watercolors he had brought from the Adirondacks. In the case of *Paddling at Dusk*, he may have touched up the figure and the canoe but he surely spent more time on the background. He brought to bear on this area a range of time-consuming techniques whose use would have been impractical or impossible in fast-fading light on a boat dock. Homer preserved the original session's spontaneity of execution while richly elaborating the subtleties of hue. In the process, he gave final balance to the composition through positioning varied intensities of color and value. When he finished, he dated the watercolor on the sheet "August 22, 1892." He was then at Prout's Neck. He inscribed the watercolor "To Ernest J. G. Yalden," confusing the sequence of the young man's initials. When Homer returned to the Adirondacks on September 17 for another three weeks of fishing, he presumably asked Yalden's father to present the painting to his son (who by then had returned to New York University) with the artist's compliments.

Beyond its distinctive subject, *Paddling at Dusk* stands as a prime example of the direction in which Homer's watercolor style had begun to move in the early 1890s. Already established as the great American master of the medium, he had over the years gradually diminished the illustrative content of his watercolors and worked more freely in a very broad range of techniques. He used his unexcelled virtuosity to create nearly nonrepresentational passages of paint, as he did in the washes of blues and greens in the background in *Paddling*. Subjects remained important, but increasingly he sought to have the educated viewer's eye linger at the painting's surface to find in his abstraction of line, shape, and color a feast of visual pleasure. Without ever being part of the movement toward modernism, Homer's late work in this way presages the aesthetic concerns of the generation of artists in Europe and America who, after the turn of the century, broke with nineteenth-century academic tradition. The marked individuality of Homer's voice as an artist, and his instinct for innovation in technique, both so evident in *Paddling at Dusk*, help explain why many within America's first generation of modernists held Homer in such high regard.

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