

# Snap the Whip

## by Winslow Homer

### Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on canvas
- Date: 1872
- Size: 22" x 36"
- Location: The Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio.
- Style: Realism
- Genre: Genre Painting
- Snap the whip was a popular children's game in the 1800s and early 1900s. Children held hands tightly and then ran very fast. The first kids in line stop suddenly, yanking the other kids sideways. This causes the ones at the end to break free from the chain. Winning involved being the last person to not get broken from the chain. The painting portrays children playing this game in a landscape.
- The historic painting depicts nine young boys playing the age-old game entitled 'Snap the Whip'. The children are pulling and tugging each other back and forth, while the two at the end of the line have fallen over. The soft, glow of sunlight that peaks through the clouds illuminates their faces. Their clothing, more specifically their caps, suspenders, and short pants, reflects true late 1800 American attire. Featured in the background is the familiar little red schoolhouse; the school's teachers in the distance are most likely meant to be supervising the usual recess activity. The scenic landscape of trees and wildflowers bordering a small field is so realistic that the viewer can almost hear the chirping of the birds and the buzzing of the insects.
- 'Snap the Whip' was a huge success for the artist, and the painting was frequently reproduced. It was displayed at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia.
- Children embodied innocence and the promise of America's future and were depicted by many artists and writers during the 1870s. Here Homer reminisces about rural simplicity and reflects on the challenges of the complex post-Civil War world.
- Released from the confines of a one-room schoolhouse, exuberant boys engage in a spirited game. As the population shifted to cities and the little red schoolhouse faded from memory, this image would have evoked nostalgia for the nation's agrarian past.
- The boys' bare feet signal childhood's freedom but their suspenders are associated with manhood's responsibilities.
- Their game, which requires teamwork, strength, and calculation, may allude to the reunited nation. Observed from right to left, Homer's boys hang on to one another, strain to stay connected, run in perfect harmony, and fall away, enacting all the possible scenarios for men after the Civil War.
- The mountain setting echoes the curving diagonal line of the boys in the foreground.
- This painting is one of Winslow Homer's most discussed and reproduced works.
- One of the reasons it is so well known is that it exists in several versions: a large figure drawing for the central group of boys (1872, Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York), a finished oil study (1872, Metropolitan Museum of Art), the final Butler Institute canvas, and another figure drawing believed to be a cartoon (Fig. 1), for the nearly exact replica executed as a wood

engraving and published in Harper's Weekly, September 20, 1873 (Fig. 2). In addition, there are a few closely related works also dating from the early seventies, School Time (n.d., Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon, Upperville, Va.) and Country School (1871, Saint Louis Art Museum).

- For more information: [http://www.butlerart.com/pc\\_book/pages/winslow\\_homer\\_1836.htm](http://www.butlerart.com/pc_book/pages/winslow_homer_1836.htm)

### Artist Facts

- Born February 24, 1836 in Boston, Massachusetts
- Died September 29, 1910
- Homer never married and in his most productive years lived a highly secluded life, seemingly content according to his letters and family accounts
- He was always interested in art, in part because his mother was a skilled painter and always encouraged her son to sketch what he saw. She was his first art teacher. He painted in a style called realism, meaning that we can plainly see and understand what he painted. His paintings were realistic.
- After the Civil War, he traveled and studied in Europe for several years including France from 1866 to 1867.
- He started drawing illustrations for magazines by age 19. He was a successful artist by 21, painting images he saw of the Civil War.
- After the war, he settled back into the rural northeast and painted what he saw. He loved painting people in a landscape setting (a painting that has strong elements of nature in it like trees, mountains, etc.), which is what he saw. He loved using watercolors best.
- His early career consisted of himself painting pictures of people in their natural rural settings. Over time, he changed from doing people in landscapes to people in seascapes (pictures involving water).
- He received many awards for his paintings and became a very important American painter.
- In 1962, the U.S. Post Office released a commemorative stamp honoring Winslow Homer. Homer's famous oil painting "Breezing Up", now hanging in the National Gallery in Washington DC, was chosen as the image for the design of this issue. On August 12, 2010, The Postal Service issued a 44-cent commemorative stamp featuring Homer's "Boys in a Pasture" at the APS Stamp Show in Richmond, Virginia. The original painting is part of the Hayden Collection at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.
- In 1998, one of Homer's paintings entitled "Lost on the Grand Banks" sold for approximately 30 million dollars! It is estimated that Homer created 600 works of art, but very few are owned privately; most are safely kept in museums.

### Key Element of Design to Teach

- **Line** is a mark on a surface that defines a shape or outline. Lines may be drawn or implied. They may be straight or curvilinear. They can create texture and be made thick or thin. Lines are often used to wrap around objects to make shapes. They can be horizontal, vertical and diagonal. Lines are usually used to take the viewer's eye around and through a composition.

### **Possible Questions to Teach Line**

- What lines do you see in this painting? (diagonal lines on the roof and mountains, horizontal lines on the schoolhouse, lines creating the grass and the trees, line formed from them all joining hands for the game, line of their shadows across the grass, lines of their suspenders....)
- The lines in this painting help take you around the painting. (The roof points you back to the half circle created from their arms. The lines take you in an oval shape through the painting.)
- Where do you see curved lines? Where do you see straight lines?
- Which lines show the most movement? (The curved ones. The barn is obviously still while the boys are all moving.)
- You could bring in examples of items in the painting to let the students feel actual grass, leaves, flowers, cloth, wood. Look at how the artist used lines to paint these items.
- The wood on the schoolhouse has lines to show the texture. What would the wood feel like on the schoolhouse?
- The grass is created by using many small lines. What would it feel like on their feet to run barefoot? (grass soft, rocks might hurt, maybe bees?)
- The trees, flowers and leaves have lines to show texture. Do they look hard or fluffy?
- All of these textures are implied meaning the way it is painted gives it the appearance of having a certain textural quality.

### **Keywords**

- Perspective, line, texture, color, movement

### **Other Possible Questions**

- Do you think Snap the Whip is a team sport or an individual one?
- What is the building in the background? (Schoolhouse)
- How do you think they got to school? (There were no cars, so most walked. Others were lucky enough to ride horses or to have a horse drawn buggy.)
- What sounds could you hear if you were in the painting?
- What do you think the weather would feel like? What kind of day is it?
- Why do the people on the left look smaller than the people on the right? (perspective: the people on the left are further away. That is why the building is small on the left as well.)
- Can you find the complementary colors that the artist used? (red and green)