

Alfred Thompson Bricher's a Pensive Moment and Winslow Homer's the New Novel

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Abstract

In the 1870s, amidst a virtual explosion of socially relevant as well as nostalgic images attempting to aid in the recuperation of a nation having survived a long and violent Civil War, Winslow Homer and Alfred Thompson Bricher created and exhibited a pair of watercolor compositions that addressed the gender and sexual issues arising in the mid- to late Victorian era. These images may well have been inspired by the two artists' personal experiences and also their positive attitudes towards women, but also likely encouraged by an ever increasing Women's Rights movement led by women such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others as early as the 1840s. The movement gained tremendous momentum in the post-Civil War period. Tradition- challenging Homer and sometimes provocative Bricher painted two paintings that prove to be well worth exploring because of their clearly different though equally compelling images of young Victorian women reading. Reading was very much the domain of men in this period, so when novels started becoming a commonplace, inexpensive item to which young women gravitated, many men of high stature saw it as detrimental and worthy of their criticism.

Keywords: Homer, Bricher, Victorian, watercolor, 19th century, Women reading, novels.

Section 1.1

By the time the 1870s arrived, a former illustrator and emerging painter had caught the attention of the public, the critics, and also the art community, i.e. Winslow Homer. Homer's strong use of colors diagonally emphasized compositional structures and his unusual choices, paired with his treatment of common, popular or contemporary subjects, made him stand out among his peers and demand attention.

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His growing celebrity was not lost on emerging marine and genre painter, Alfred Thompson Bricher. Due to his high visibility at National Academy exhibitions, in particular those of the American Watercolor Society, Bricher's presence were certainly not overlooked by Homer during this time period. (*Scribner's Monthly*, April 1874, 761)

By the mid- to late 1870s Bricher and the art viewing public recognized that Homer's exploration of current morés, strong female subjects and burgeoning, sometimes controversial cultural practices, such as reading novels—a new and growing presence in popular culture—were among the New Englander's most highly celebrated works. On the other hand, Bricher may have painted his *A Pensive Moment* (1875-80) earlier than Homer had rendered his watercolor, *The New Novel* in 1877, so perhaps the better-known painter's choice, despite their different treatment of the subject, exhibits a familiarity with the former's painting.



According to Elizabeth Johns in her study *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (1991), genre painting in the period of its primary practice in the United States lasted from the 1830s to the 1860s, i.e. the years leading up to the Civil War. She wondered “just what the ideology of ‘everyday life’ has been over time—who has been represented as constituting it, with what activities, and for what purposes.” (Johns, 1991, ix) She goes on to say that to “characterize genre images as ‘scenes from everyday life’ not only is inadequate but obscures the social relations that underlie this type of painting.” (Johns, 1991) I believe that *A Pensive Moment* and *The New Novel* explore the everyday life of a growing social class in the United States. It was a more affluent, rising middle class riding the wake of a newly booming post-Civil war economy.

Johns asks the questions, "Just whose 'everyday life' is depicted?" and "What is the relationship of the actors in this 'everyday life' to the viewers?" (Johns, 1991) Homer's and Bricher's paintings clearly were created outside the chronological limits of Johns's study, but perhaps it is because both artists created their images in a way that is not quite genre, nor can they be classified as portraits.

They are studies of everyday "situations" rather than "everyday life" in an era when America and its social dynamics were changing into something very different than the period explored by Johns's book. If Johns had extended the period of her study to include the late 19th century, then Homer and Bricher, along with several others, may have been counted among her important genre painters. They do fit her definition of a genre painting, because they both clearly exhibit the socio-political perspectives of each respective artist strongly anchored within his time.

Each of these works is executed in watercolor, another new post-Civil War phenomenon. (Finch, 1986, 86) This medium allowed the artists to create their works more rapidly than an oil painting and make them more affordable and accessible to a wider audience. There was also, at least in the hands of Homer and Bricher, more immediacy to the image in this medium than in the more labor-intensive, and according to Homer himself, belabored medium of oil. Though he was celebrated for his oils during his lifetime, Homer once wrote to his brother Charles that "You will see, in the future I will live by my watercolors." (Goodrich, 1944, 159) Likewise, Bricher was a prolific oil painter, but an even more prolific watercolorist.

Both artists seemed to have gravitated toward Victorian female subjects in the 1870s and 1880s as part of an ever-growing field of American and European painters dealing with the subject. This move toward an increasingly popular subject in late 19th-century American art may have been a result of the fact that Victorian women were beginning to break free from the role to which they were relegated, in the 1860s and 1870s. Lone female subjects gradually started to appear in the works of mid-late 19th-century genre painters both in Europe and in the United States.

In the post-bellum era new inventions, technology and printing methods seemed to liberate portions of the heretofore socially shackled female population and lead them in the direction of what E.L. Godkin, editor of *The Nation*, condescendingly referred to as "a growing contemptible pseudo-culture that included newspapers, magazines, lyceum lectures, small colleges," and I might add, inexpensive novels written by women for women. (Marzio, 1979, 99)

Homer's penchant for exploring unconventional themes, i.e., his series of African-American subjects during and just after the Civil War, for instance, or dealing with conventional subjects in an unconventional way, are well known.

In contrast, Bricher on seems to be riding the wake of increasingly popular themes in post-Bellum America, rather than exploring bold new ways of representing them, but on occasion apparently looks at them sometimes more personally or autobiographically, as opposed to thematically.

Perhaps this proliferation of female subjects in the work of Homer and Bricher was due to their own atypical Victorian relationships with women. Little is known of the relationship between Bricher and his mother although he does seem to have a close relationship with his second wife, Alice Robinson, but Homer seems to have regarded his mother as his primary role model, particularly during his formative years. (Downes, 1911, 23) His mother, Henrietta Benson Homer, was at home raising Winslow and his brothers, while his father was working in his hardware business in town or far away chasing some pipe dream that he hoped would result in fame and fortune. (Downes, 1911) Henrietta Homer gave her son's life stability and taught him the watercolor technique, as she was quite a competent watercolorist who exhibited her work from time to time at local exhibitions. (Cikovsky, 1995, 17).

In examining the two paintings, i.e. Bricher's *A Pensive Moment* (1875-80) and Homer's *The New Novel* (1877), we can see how the two contemporaries dealt with similar social themes in vastly different ways. It is, of course, interesting to note that both artists chose subjects whose only or primary characters were female. Homer's deep attachment to his mother and Bricher's admiration of Victorian women—Bricher painted several paintings featuring female characters, in both oil and watercolor in the 1870s and 1880s—drove each of them to explore female subjects in more than a cursory way in these two paintings. (Cikovsky, 1995) Their women were individuals of character rather than merely empty actors in a visual play.

Homer seemed to be critical of the attitude of Godkin and his compatriots in that any young woman who read for pleasure was nothing but a wastrel. (Veblen, 1899) Clearly, Homer did not sympathize with the age's chauvinist view of women's role in contemporary Victorian society.

Apparently, neither Homer nor Bricher agreed with the age's assessment of women's lack of value as individuals, and felt sympathetic to the practice of Victorian women reading novels to help them escape into a world of adolescent fancy or adult catharsis, whether young or more mature. Homer's criticism of the chauvinist point of view is manifested in his choice to explore this very subject in one of his popular watercolor compositions, i.e. a young woman, obviously of an affluent family, completely absorbed by the novel she is reading. With this approach he debunks and thumbs his nose at conservatives like Godkin and his friends

Homer may also have chosen to depict a teenage girl rather than a more mature woman because of her youth, perhaps sticking the knife even more deeply into Godkin's condescending and opinionated brand of criticism. Helen Cooper says, "that he [Homer] chose childhood, however, and not any other theme of quotidian American life, is not surprising." Cooper goes on to say that "no stage of life was so exalted in nineteenth-century art and literature, especially after the Civil War, as childhood."

Many of Homer's watercolor subjects in the 1870s were of children. Along with a host of other painters, Homer produced images that served as a post-war cleansing of the soiled feeling most Americans felt after the war finally came to a conclusion. These innocent and pure images of unburdened, care-free youngsters at their activities, served as foils to the negative feelings left in the hearts of many Americans trying to put the trauma of the Civil War behind them. The visual arts had their parallels in contemporary literature, as well.

In *The New Novel* Homer's young woman is lying down on the grass in her backyard just slightly removed from the public eye—on the other side of the hedge is the "real" world—yet free from worldly burdens, and shown enjoying her escape into the fantasy and perhaps subtly sexually suggestive story in which she is clearly immersed. The fact that mid-19th-century fiction seemed to have been geared toward just this type of middle-class young woman was part of what bothered the conservative, self-appointed cultural guardians of Victorian propriety, such as Godkin. Though Homer most likely intended no inappropriate allusion to this young woman's burgeoning sexuality—she appears to be either late pre-pubescent or already a "young woman"—it still refers to what some scholars have attributed to Homer's possible exploration of sexuality in other works where it may well be a consciously hidden theme.

Sexuality may not be shown blatantly here, but still, the young woman, covered from neck to toes with a typical Victorian dress in the era's acceptable style of apparel for a young woman of her age, has ruddy cheeks and pursed, painted lips, bright red hair, not to mention her bright vermilion dress; attributes very attractive to men, no matter the age of the woman at which the sexually active man gazes. Furthermore, she is lying down, also a not-so-subtle allusion to the act of sex, as opposed to sitting respectfully in a chair in the parlor of her parents' home. All of these seemingly innocent aspects of the young woman could be easily misconstrued as sexually suggestive by contemporary Victorian viewers if they so chose. Jules Prown in "Winslow Homer in His Art" (1987) discusses the use of red in Homer's *The Life Line* (1884) as alluding to sexuality, and this watercolor, in a similar manner, also makes free use of the color red, not a dominant tone in Homer's work. (Prown, 1987)

From a formal vantage point, the pervasiveness of red in *The New Novel* creates an array of unifying elements in the watercolor, but note the red streaks, particularly on the tasseled pillow on which the young woman rests her head. The pillow could easily symbolize femininity and female sexuality to a Victorian audience, as it is “round” and delicate of design.

As in his *The Life Line*, in a similar manner, either consciously or unconsciously, Homer appears to explore female sexuality or even something more personal, such as unrequited love or frustrated male sexuality. It could also point to a growing subtheme in Homer’s work of the late 1870s and 1880s concerning young women as subjects, whether innocent or something of a less benign nature.

In contrast, unlike Homer’s possible exploration of an underlying sexual angle, Bricher, in *A Pensive Moment*, seemed to comment on the disgruntled, lonely, unfulfilled middle-class Victorian housewife’s lot in life. Many of his paintings of women reveal a kind of underlying discontent. Some of the women are young and some more mature, but this discontent seems to unite Bricher’s female subjects.

In *A Pensive Moment*, this sense of dissatisfaction probably had no bearing on the woman’s sexuality as much as her gender. Her experience was far removed from that of an innocent, unburdened, blossoming young teenage girl, her mind full of fantasy, sexual or otherwise. When viewed together, the two paintings might be regarded as companion pieces or “bookends” of a middle-class Victorian woman’s life. One shows an adolescent girl, innocent and unencumbered by the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood, though in the process of maturing (Homer’s *The New Novel*), while the other tells the story of an emotionally stressed thirty-something woman, weighted down by the pressures of maturity, the obligatory marriage and its unavoidable complications (Bricher’s *A Pensive Moment*).

In *A Pensive Moment*, Bricher’s woman seems to be the beneficiary of affluence and comfort, wanting for nothing materialistically, judging by her apparel and the fact that she has the leisure time to take a stroll on the beach and read a book. As she leans against the beached sailboat—Bricher spotlights the small vessel as if on a stage—a lone sailor is walking home from his just-landed fishing boat. There is a kind of social juxtaposition between the privileged discontented woman and the simple but relatively carefree laborer: the fisherman.

The woman wears a fashionable bonnet on her head, carries a stylish parasol to protect her delicate complexion from the summer sun, and presumably, is shod with high-heeled boots typical of late 19th-century Victorian style; not exactly the ideal clothing for a walk on the beach.

Physically, she sits in her unfulfilling world of affluent middle-class existence, while in her mind she may be imagining that she is the lover of a carefree Romantic character, perhaps like the sailor who, dressed in simple lower-middle-class clothing and carrying his bulging kit bag, containing everything he owns, walks in the distance behind her. The woman and the sailor might represent the parity between upper-middle-class existence and that of the common man; a complicated life versus a more simple one.

The boat against which the woman leans serves compositionally as a link between the two worlds, but also serves to separate the two irreconcilable social strata that existed side by side during the Victorian era.

The mere fact of the woman walking on the sand in what appears to be the summer season is evidence that she is most probably there on vacation, a practice quite common among middle-class Victorian families. Yet, in spite of these material privileges, the woman seems somehow unhappy. There are numerous possible scenarios we, as viewers, could apply to the woman's situation in the painting, but the disgruntled housewife narrative is a most compelling one.

In 1878, as today, money did not equal happiness. Perhaps Bricher's woman felt the pain of the vacuum created by the lack of outwardly displayed tenderness and affection, as well as the absence of openly sincere respect of a man for whom she sacrificed her dreams to bear and rear children and keep his house in order. At the same time, she plays out her role as the executrix of the Victorian home and the almost inescapable dictates of Victorian social rules and societal expectations. Furthermore, any personal aspirations she may have harbored for her own future as a single young woman, separate from her wifely and maternal duties, were also kept from her because of what society deemed her more significant obligations. Amy Kaplan has written that, "the unreality that developed in American fiction in the 1880s and 1890s both articulates and combats the growing sense of unreality at the heart of mid-century life." (Kaplan, 1988, 9)¹ *A Pensive Moment* seems to pictorialize that notion even before it found its verbal voice in the printed word a decade or so later.

The transformation of the urban environment by industrialization began to confuse and frighten people. In the wake of vast social changes, the bourgeoisie lost sight of what its priorities in life were supposed to be. Increasingly, at the end of the century, Victorian women sought out popular novels in an attempt to somehow soften the blow of these changes. (Douglas, 1988, 62-63)

Popular literature was not always a benign source of entertainment, however. Best-selling novels frequently told stories about female protagonists who boldly and wantonly rejected traditional authority.

Some of the most popular novels portrayed how an unhappy wife suffered because of the difficulty and impossibility of divorce, and of society's intolerance toward divorced women. This social framework was virtually impossible to escape and many women were caught in painful, life-long servitude or unhappy marriages. (Garrison, 1976, 144) These are possibly the subversive kinds of literature that Godkin feared as harbingers of the breakdown of the Victorian status quo.

Parallel to this mode of artistic expression, and perhaps in reaction to it, a nostalgic trend in art and literature developed to further fuel women's longings to escape the realities of modern, middle-class urban existence. Nostalgia represents a yearning for familiar or beloved circumstances from the past that are either remote or unrecoverable. The woman in Bricher's painting exhibits a body language and facial expression indicating state of reverie and her downward-cast eyes seem to point, from her perspective, to her empty, unfulfilled and non-productive life. Unlike the book she is reading, the woman in the painting does not possess saccharine qualities of sentiment and nostalgia or the excitement of intrigue, though perhaps she dreams of them. Instead, her body language seems to speak of dissatisfaction, introspection, loss of innocence, isolation, and even profound boredom.

Perhaps the novel she reads is a Romantic adventure with the heroine exercising the freehand abandoned attitude of many of the protagonists who populated the pages of romance novels written by female authors specifically targeting middle-class housewives and young women as their primary audience from the 1860s onward.

The novel, which dangles from her hands, the only means of escape from her dry and lonely existence, rests on the cascading pleats of her frilly dress. She has apparently forgotten that she was reading it for the moment, lost in its narrative, and dreams of how her life could be much more satisfying if she could share in the experience of the main character in the book. This notion is reiterated by the expression on her face, indicating depression and maybe even hopelessness. This points to thoughts beyond innocent imagination and leads us to conjecture that maybe she wishes she could be a character in the novel she holds, rather than face the reality of her own daily existence.

What options did a middle-class Victorian housewife have to give her life meaning? Even if the woman in *A Pensive Moment* is living a life of relative leisure and affluence, still it does not detract from the fact that most middle-class women's opportunities for self-improvement and advancement outside the confines of their homes in the late 19th century were quite limited by Victorian society's asphyxiating gender rules.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony led the struggle for women's rights in the United States beginning in 1868, just a few years before both Homer and Bricher painted these two paintings. Though it had not quite caught on in a big way in the United States at first, it was certainly something that could have inspired artists such as Homer and Bricher, who both showed a strong penchant for painting positive, non-chauvinistic images of women, to at least explore the roles of women in Victorian society and the exposure of inequities therein.

While Homer supports the idea of a self-improving, innocent young woman on the threshold of womanhood, Bricher speaks of the future she most likely would face if her life led down the same path that claimed the average Victorian middle-class housewife.

References

¹*Scribner's Monthly* 7, April 1874, 761.

² Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1991, xi.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Christopher Finch, *American Watercolors*, New York, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, 86. The first annual exhibition of American watercolors was launched by the American Society of Painters in Watercolor (later re-named the American Watercolor Society) in 1866.

⁶ Lloyd Goodrich, *Winslow Homer*, McMillan Company, New York, 1944, 159. 'He himself must have been conscious of this, for he once said to Charles R. Henschel of Knoedler's: "You will see, in the future I will live by my water- colors."

⁷ See the work of Jules Bastien-LePage, for example.

⁸ Peter Marzio, *The Democratic Art*, Fort Worth, TX, Amon Carter Museum of Art, 1979, 99. I would also like to point out that Thomas Cole, the father of American landscape painting and one of the United States's most revered of three quarters of the nineteenth century, delivered one of the seminal speeches on American landscape painting at a lyceum lecture in New York City in 1836. See John McCoubrey, *American Art 1700-1960* (Sources & Documents in the History of Art Series), 1965.

⁹ Look, for instance, at *At the Shore* (1871) or *Dana's Island, Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts* (1879).

¹⁰ William Howe Downes, *The Life and Works of Winslow Homer*, Houghton Mifflin, 1911, 23. In 1849, the year of the discovery of gold in California, when Homer was 13 years old, his father closed his hardware shop and left Boston for the West in interest of the Freemont Mining Company. He loaded a vessel with mining machinery in Boston, sent it to California, while he journeyed by land, and was gone for two years. When Homer arrived in California, he discovered that the company's claim had been jumped and his efforts to reclaim the property was unsuccessful. Though he left Boston with great pomp, taking "brass-bound trunks eliciting the admiration of the boys," when he returned home to his family, two years later, his gripsack was tied with a string."

¹¹ Ibid. As a maturing teenaged boy, when his interests in life were forming, and he needed a father's guidance, his mother became the role model after which he modeled his own life. "Mrs. Homer was a gracious, gentle lady, who had a pretty talent for painting flower pieces in watercolors." She even took painting lessons after she was married.

¹² Nicolai Cikovsky, Jr. and Franklin Kelly, *Winslow Homer*, Washington, DC, National Gallery of Art, 1995, 17. His mother passed on her penchant for and talent in watercolor techniques to her son, but despite his father's "fecklessness," Charles Savage Homer, was in his own way, equally instrumental in his son Winslow's achievement. He encouraged his son's "leaning towards art."

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Thorsten Veblen *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899. In Veblen's research of late 19th-century leisure-class behavior and attitude, the wealthy considered something like reading (the Classics) as a "non-productive consumption of time," something positive in their minds and their right as wealthy, sophisticated members of society. Young women of the middle class apparently did not enjoy the perquisite of leisure time, so the pervasive practice of reading contemporary romance novels by this segment of Victorian society was not acceptable to the upper class initiates and supporters of a leisure life.

¹⁵Homer had been harshly criticized by *The Nation's* art critic after showing watercolors at the annual exhibition of the American Society of Painters in Watercolors in 1877. The critic complained that "Mr. Homer was never more careless and capricious and trying." *The Nation* 26, 14 February 1878, 120.

¹⁶Helen C. Cooper, *Winslow Homer Watercolors*, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., 1986, 25.

¹⁷Ibid. But this did not mean in most conservative people's eyes that women engage in activities inappropriate to their station in society, such as reading novels.

¹⁸At the same time, Homer also began to explore gender dynamics between young men and women, not overlooking the tensions that can exist with burgeoning sexuality and maturity.

¹⁹Two examples of just such literature were Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* published in 1868, and Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* published in 1876, satisfying the public's need for stories involving children as their main subjects.

²⁰See Jules Prown's discussion of Homer's *The Life Line* in "Winslow Homer in His Art," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring, 1987), pp. 30-45.

²¹There are several Homer watercolors of women sitting in chairs and/or otherwise engaged in everyday activities from the 1870s, such as *Backgammon* (1877), *The Butterfly Girl* (1878), *Girl Seated* (1879) or *Woman with Elephant* (1877)

²²Jules Prown, *Smithsonian Studies in American Art*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring, 1987), pp. 37-38.

²³See Homer's watercolors of women from the 1870s. *Fresh Eggs* (1874), *In the Garden* (1874), *Blackboard* (1877), *Woman Peeling a Lemon* (1877), *Portrait of a Lady* (1875), (1879), and *The Trysting Place* (1875)

²⁴Julia Margaret Cameron's portraits of young Victorian women, though almost all beautiful, are at the same time, without exception, sad images, because not one of them register even a semblance of joy on their faces. Whether they are straight forward portraits or allegorical characters staged by Cameron to illustrate or embody an idea, as was quite popular in 19th-century art, her women all look like unhappy characters. Bricher's woman in this painting seems to reflect the same disgruntled life experience as Cameron's women, i.e. their discontent with their roles as Victorian women.

²⁵See Bricher's *Drifting* (1878) or *Under the Seaside Tree* (1879).

²⁶Lee M. Edwards, *Domestic Bliss: Family Life in American Painting, 1840-1910*, Yonkers, New York, The Hudson River Museum, 1986, 9.

²⁷Several novels were published from the mid- to the late 19th century dealing with the disgruntled, though relatively affluent Victorian housewives, such as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, first published in 1857, and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* published in 1877, approximately the year that both Homer and Bricher are believed to have painted their watercolors.

²⁸Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Chicago and London, The University Press of Chicago, 1988, 9.

²⁹Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1977, repr., New York, Anchor Press, 1988, 62-63.

³⁰Dee Garrison, "Immoral Fiction in the Late Victorian Library," *Victorian America*, ed. Daniel Walker Howe, University of Pennsylvania Press; 1st edition, 1976, 144.