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book review of

Shipwreck!: Winslow Homer and “The Life Line” by Kathleen A. Foster

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Kathleen A. Foster,
Shipwreck!: Winslow Homer and "The Life Line".
Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012.
144 pp.; 105 color plates; 5 b&w illustrations; checklist; exhibition history; bibliography; index.
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The catalog, *Shipwreck!: Winslow Homer and "The Life Line"*, accompanied an exhibition of the same title on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) from September 22, 2012–January 1, 2013. The central subject of both the publication and the exhibition is *The Life Line* (1884), a celebrated painting by Winslow Homer in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It depicts the dramatic rescue at sea of a young woman by a man in a breeches buoy. The two figures in the center of the painting hang precariously from a rope suspended between the wrecked ship on the left and the shore on the right as waves surge, break, and crash around them. This painting has long been regarded as one of Homer's greatest works, and it has undergone much art historical analysis, as attested to by the extensive (63 to be exact) list of references to it in publications after Homer's lifetime in the catalog's bibliography. Yet, despite so much prior scholarly attention, questions about the painting's significance and why Homer selected the theme of a rescue at sea remain.

The catalog consists of a foreword by Timothy Rub, The George D. Widener Director and Chief Executive Officer of the Philadelphia Museum of Art; acknowledgments and an essay with extensive footnotes by Kathleen A. Foster,

The Robert L. McNeil, Jr., Senior Curator of American Art and Director of the Center for American Art; a checklist of the exhibition with illustrations not found in the earlier essay; an exhibition history of *The Life Line*; a bibliography divided into the critical reception of the painting both during and after the artist's lifetime as well as additional sources on Homer's work, marine painting, and the history of life-saving technology; and an index. In the director's foreword, Rub begins by justifying the museum's decision to concentrate on this single, historical artwork by mentioning its relevance for contemporary viewers: "[t]he more

we know about a work of art . . . the more its meaning resonates in our own time, often in unanticipated ways" (vi). He then continues that masterpieces like *The Life Line* "tap into a deep well of common human experience . . . and these works have the capacity to move us as much today as they did the audiences for whom they were created" (vi). Rub's statement, despite seeming like a platitude, is particularly applicable to Homer's *The Life Line*. Even with the more technologically advanced ships and marine instruments of the twenty first century, we cannot prevent shipwrecks. The sea remains a powerful, often uncontrollable and terrifying force of nature, and shipwrecks and rescue efforts continue to be newsworthy events, which occupy the imagination of artists. Indeed, at the same time that Homer's *The Life Line* was on exhibit in Philadelphia, the Swiss-born, Paris-based artist Thomas Hirschhorn's work *Concordia!* *Concordia!* was on view at the Gladstone Gallery in New York. In response to the 2012 disaster of the Costa Concordia cruise ship in Italy, Hirschhorn created a lifesize installation of part of the ship's interior filled with life jackets; broken tables and chairs; cheap, Styrofoam decorations, and a photographic reproduction of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819). He tipped up the floor of the gallery, arranging the chaotic assemblage at the same precarious angle at which the ship rested after it ran aground. Consequently, gallery viewers were supposed to experience a sense of queasiness, even seasickness, when they stood before it. Both Hirschhorn and Homer, over a century apart, took up the subject of shipwrecks and their aftermath, but Hirschhorn's commentary about humanity's hubris and decadence contrasts with Homer's "counteraffirmation of exemplary American character and responsibility" (27). The emotional impact of Homer's work may transcend time, but we cannot fully comprehend its meaning without the contextual material that the catalog provides.

As Foster explains in her acknowledgments, the exhibition and catalog arose out of a series of observations she made: first, she saw a strange shadow, a pentimento, in Homer's painting, suggesting that he had altered it in the late stages of production, and second, she noticed that two Tucker and Hemphill vases near her curatorial office depicted similar pendant narratives of disaster and rescue at sea and wondered if they might offer context for *The Life Line*. The catalog, therefore, starts with the curator's personal account of the generative potential of both close looking and thematic analysis across a range of visual and material culture. Notably, Foster's object-oriented method informs the layout of the catalog, which has carefully placed images interspersed throughout its pages so that the reader can easily find the visual evidence for the argument being advanced and can assess its accuracy.

Divided into fourteen sections, Foster's essay unfolds from the general to the specific, from the shipwreck and rescue at sea tradition in art to Homer's *The Life Line* and its modernization of existing iconography. It contributes to the ongoing tendency in art historical scholarship to dispel the myth of Homer's realist and distinctly American approach by emphasizing the diversity of sources available to him for inspiration, the symbolic interpretations of his work, and his studio practice. After a short introduction to the treacherousness of the sea during Homer's period (reinforced by statistics from 1884, the year Homer painted *The Life Line*) and the corresponding fears about it, the text provides a visual analysis of *The Life Line*, introducing the themes of human heroism, modern technology, and the romance of rescue, explored later. In the succeeding section, aptly titled "Clear Sailing," Foster presents a brief biography of Homer and explains his "generally sunny practice" with regard to the sea before 1881. Here, she establishes the notable shift in attitude and mood in his later works, such as *The Life Line*.

Next, Foster broadens her scope and transitions to representations of stormier seas dating back to the seventeenth century, stating that Homer would have known this genre of marine painting. This part of the essay traces the development of “tempest” and shipwreck imagery from the imaginary, highly theatrical scenes of storm-tossed boats in the work of the Dutch seventeenth-century painter Bonaventura Peeters to the more naturalistic, sublime shipwrecks of the French eighteenth-century artist Claude-Joseph Vernet, who “visualized marine disaster for an international public and codified the structure of such pictures for succeeding generations of artists and collectors” (9). As Foster describes them, Vernet’s formulaic pictures represent “dark and stormy” skies with dramatic lighting effects; waves crashing “against towering cliffs,” often with blasted trees attesting to the strength of the storm; and a vessel struggling off shore with figures responding to the disaster in a diversity of ways, including grasping onto the wreck or seeking refuge on land (9). Drawing on the seascapes of Vernet and those of earlier Dutch seventeenth-century painters, British and American artists, including George Morland, J. M. W. Turner, Thomas Birch, and Edward Moran, arrived at their own closely related portrayals of shipwrecks. In her assessment of marine painting, Foster charts the development of the images as they become increasingly naturalistic and more focused on human narratives despite their dependence on literary sources. She comments on the growing reception for this type of painting, especially for rising “naval and trading powers” like Britain and the United States, and she explains the dissemination of works by Vernet and others through exhibitions, prints, copies, and forgeries (9, 10). To construct this history, Foster relies primarily on paintings drawn from both the PMA’s own collection and that of nearby institutions, such as the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (William Trost Richards); the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (Claude-Joseph Vernet); and the Washington County Museum of Fine Arts, Hagerstown, Maryland (Thomas Birch). Some might critique her for such a localized approach, but she successfully highlights the PMA’s holdings, fulfilling one of the project’s goals.

Moving beyond the history of the genre, the next section, “The Pleasures of Shipwreck and Storm” seeks to understand why someone might choose to paint or to own a storm or shipwreck scene as opposed to a tranquil day at sea or by the shore. Foster offers a range of possible explanations from professional artistic concerns (the technical challenges of light effects, color, and composition in a stormy seascape) to the audience’s desire for a cathartic experience (a reminder of catastrophe and death or its fortunate absence) to the public or private commemoration of a national or personal tragedy, though most depictions were based on a literary source, such as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* or Falconer’s *The Shipwreck*. In addition, nineteenth-century American viewers would have interpreted the shipwreck scenes in terms of Christian symbolism and the possibility of survival and salvation for believers, as underscored by a response in 1870 to Moran’s *Launching the Life Boat* (1865), in which the observer noted a “Divinity which shapes our ends” (20). As Foster remarks, however, such religious interpretations were complicated by the eighteenth-century ideas of the sublime, scientific discoveries, and the nineteenth-century belief in the salutary effects of the seaside. Moreover, despite better ships and navigation equipment, the shipwreck paintings became grander, perhaps because, as Foster hypothesizes, “the era’s artists, in seeking the sublime, meant to pose a lesson on the hubris of modern technology and unsettle the snug, insulated security of middle-class life, asking viewers to reconnect with ancient fears and faith” (21). Alternatively, we might consider whether the sea’s power and terror might be intensified and appreciated now that transatlantic passages were easier and less dangerous.

The rest of the essay is a series of tacks that follow Homer's treatment of the perils of the sea and his proposed response to popular rescue imagery. "Homer and the Tragedy of the Sea" explores the artist's less sunny and more threatening evocations of the sea in illustrations for *Harper's Weekly* from the late 1860s and early 1870s, specifically his treatment of sailors performing tasks on ships and a drowned woman washed up on the shore in *The Wreck of the "Atlantic"—Cast Up by the Sea* (1873, Philadelphia Museum of Art). The latter scene, which refers to a then recent disaster off the coast of Nova Scotia, reveals Homer's familiarity with the morbid and typically maudlin theme of the discovery of a drowned young woman, whose white dress signifies her innocence and vulnerability thereby emphasizing the tragic character of her demise. "Hope and Heartache" suggests Homer's familiarity with another type of seaside imagery based on the daily life of fishing communities, which must deal frequently with the fear, suspense, and grief caused by a livelihood dependent on the sea. First in the 1870s and then again in the early 1880s, Homer composed images that express the anxiety of women and children who wait by the shore for their loved ones to return home from the sea. Such melancholic works reinforce the separation of male and female spheres while conveying "a sturdy, stoic female type" (34). The following two sections titled "The Rescue" and "They're Saved! They're Saved!" address a different kind of emotionally intense scene involving a man saving a woman from disaster, whether it be from "savage foes," a prairie fire, or a shipwreck. These images, which connect male and female experience, appealed to Victorian-era audiences with their evocations of chivalrous men performing dramatic rescues on horseback, as seen in Alvan Fisher's *The Rescue* from the early 1830s and Charles Deas's *Prairie on Fire* (1847, Brooklyn Museum), or dangling from ropes over rough seas, as represented in Henry Edward Dawe's *They're Saved! They're Saved!* (1832, Philadelphia Museum of Art), reproduced on the Tucker and Hemphill vase outside of Foster's office. In her discussion of these works, Foster notes how they relate to Homer's *The Life Line*. Deas's painting, like Homer's *The Life Line*, expresses the "romance of rescue" while polarizing the male and female figures in a manner that "nobly burdens the hero, while suppressing his identity, and spotlights the woman and her sexuality, while diminishing her agency" (41). In his widely publicized image of a rescue at sea, *They're Saved! They're Saved!*, Dawe similarly hid the face of the male rescuer, showing only his muscular back, and revealed the face of the woman who clings onto her child and "become[s] the emotional center" of the scene (44). According to Foster, Homer likely knew both of these well-publicized works and may have drawn inspiration from them.

Having established visual and thematic precedents for Homer's *The Life Line*, Foster shifts to an exploration of modern lifesaving technology, including a discussion, with accompanying period illustrations, of the American Life-Saving Service and their use of the then recently invented breeches buoy. Following this description of the central motif in Homer's painting, the essay turns to the images of stormy seas and fishing communities that Homer made at Cullercoats in England and at Prout's Neck in Maine just before *The Life Line* during a period when he tried to distance himself from the New York art world and transform his artistic practice. Quite plausibly, these works seem to anticipate the 1884 painting in their more sober outlook, their overcast skies, and dynamic seascapes.

In the succeeding section, Foster closely analyzes *The Life Line* and connects it to the shipwreck genre already discussed. She observes that Homer adopted the motifs of the embattled ship, a stormy sea with massive waves, and figures struggling to stay alive. However, he diverged from tradition with his telescopic point of view; the simplification of the composition, especially the

summary treatment of the ship and shore; the portrayal of a modern life-saving apparatus; the introduction of an element of uncertainty about the outcome adding an unsettling sense of suspense; and the elimination of the family narrative by leaving out a baby. Taking up this last point, Foster argues that Homer's choice to portray a man and woman without a child meant that he had to carefully calculate "the balance between sensuousness and decorum," which was essential to the acceptance of the painting in the eyes of his Victorian-era viewers (66). Other scholars, such as Elizabeth Johns, have discussed *The Life Line* as unique in terms of its physicality, especially in its depiction of "the woman's sensual nature" due to her sea-soaked dress that exposes the shape of her body. Whereas Johns seeks to explain the woman's vulnerability and the inability of the rescuer and rescued to know each other intimately in terms of Homer's own biography, Foster explores Homer's editorial process by comparing the finished painting to an earlier sketch, an X-radiograph, and an infrared reflectogram to demonstrate how the artist attempted "to control the erotic subtext of his embracing figures" (68). Homer decoupled the couple by painting out his hand behind her head so that only the thumb of his other hand barely grazes her torso and by covering his face with her red scarf, so he cannot look at her, and we cannot see him. Foster proposes that Homer introduced a new kind of hero "unlike a fairy-tale prince, he is nameless and part of an equally anonymous team" (72). He "suppresses his own interests" and his own individuality in order to help others. Ultimately, Homer put a modern spin on the historical relationship between humanity and the sea, "ever balancing benefits with an everlasting threat of disaster and death" (72). Foster concludes that Homer's painting oscillates between old and new worldviews, and its open-ended character and the uncertain outcome of its narrative make it "rewarding as an image" (73).

The last four sections address the reception of the painting and its aftermath in Homer's oeuvre. *The Life Line* received mostly positive reviews and sold for \$2,500, the most he had earned for a painting up to this time. He also made two large prints related to the painting: in the first, he did not include the ship or the shore; and in the second, done five years later, he did not reverse the image, and he added back the rescuer's second hand supporting the woman's head. After *The Life Line*, Homer continued with other paintings evoking peril at sea though he increasingly depicted groups of men, not the "romance of rescue," until the 1890s when he turned to representations of the sea itself without figures. As Foster concludes, *The Life Line* is a transitional work that continues Homer's early interest in women but anticipates his later fascination with the elemental force of the sea.

This publication along with the exhibition it accompanied exemplifies a current trend in many museums. Rather than organizing shows that require extensive and expensive loans, curators direct their attention to masterpieces in their own collections. They also produce catalogs that enable them to research and write an in-depth analysis of a specific work, a scholarly approach that is not possible in survey or large exhibition publications, and to study a cross-temporal, cross-cultural theme, linking the selected artwork to other paintings and objects in the museum's collection. Although *Shipwreck!: Winslow Homer and "The Life Line"* has a narrow focus, arguably a self-serving one for the museum, it appeals to a general audience and to the more directed interests of Homer scholars and art historians who study shipwreck and rescue imagery. It successfully balances the general and the specific, and the section titles in the central essay and in the checklist help to guide readers looking for particular information. Foster's thesis about Homer's painting representing "a story of human heroism, modern technology, and the thrill of unexpected intimacy between strangers thrown together by

disaster" does not radically depart from the existing art historical literature (2). Instead, her contribution lies in the broad assessment of the work's art historical context and in her analysis of alterations that Homer made in the late stages of the painting's production.

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