Starting January 29 the Museum plays host to the most comprehensive exhibition of the work of Winslow Homer that has ever been assembled. The scope of this showing is so great that it opens up any number of interesting avenues of approach to the artist and his time. Many of these avenues have been explored by various writers and students in the past, yet there still remains one phase of the story that has perhaps been set aside in the pursuit of larger issues. This is the connection between the artist and our Museum. The stories that explain this relationship are not exactly forgotten but certainly they are not widely remembered. They take us into byways and lanes somewhat off the beaten track and they furnish elements that enliven our picture of the artist.

The exhibition provides us with a suitable occasion to recall some of these tales and at the same time to give an account of the development of the Museum’s extensive collection of Homer’s pictures. Taken all together, account and anecdote furnish the materials for a sort of institutional footnote to the more formal critical and biographical essays that have been written about the artist. Over a period of years and with the kind assistance of many friends, the Museum has assembled a really remarkable collection of Homer’s work. We now have fifteen of his major paintings in oil, among them some of his best and most famous works: for example, The Gulf Stream, The Northeaster, The Campfire, Prisoners from the Front, and others equally well known to a large public. This group of paintings illustrates admirably every phase and style of the artist’s development from beginning to end.

They are supplemented by a superb group of
Prisoners from the Front. Painted 1866. Oil on canvas. Height 24 inches.

Gift of Mrs. Frank B. Porter, 1922

eighteen drawings and water colors, each one a small masterpiece. Further supporting and illuminating these pictures is an extensive collection of prints representing all aspects of Homer’s work as apprentice lithographer and master illustrator. To these works of art we might add some interesting autograph letters from Winslow Homer which in their special way also reveal the character and style of hand of the man.

Perhaps the most unusual Museum story about Homer is the one of how the famous canvas The Gulf Stream was acquired by the Museum, for its purchase was attended by unusual circumstances. Some of the original water-color studies for this subject were made in Nassau as early as 1885, but the theme was not developed on canvas until 1899. The picture was exhibited in an unfinished state at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1900. After this showing Homer made a number of improvements on the painting and sent it to his dealers, priced at $4,000. For a time the picture attracted no attention. The Worcester Museum considered buying it but the subject matter was judged to be too unpleasant, too brutal for the sensitive art lovers of central Massachusetts in 1902. In 1906 the canvas was sent to the Winter Exhibition of the National Academy of Design, an exhibition which was held in the galleries of the Fine Arts Building on West 57th Street (the home of the Art Students’ League). According to the account in American Art News, when the picture was brought before the gentlemen of the jury someone was heard to say “Boys, that ought to be in the Metropolitan.” A petition suggesting that the Museum buy the painting was drawn up then and there and signed by all the members of the jury, with Kenyon Cox as chairman, and this was forwarded with a letter to Robert de Forest, Secretary of the Museum, from Will H. Low, a member of the Academy and a juror of the exhibition. After due deliberation the Trustees of the Museum decided to follow the suggestion and the painting was purchased. Roger Fry, who was then Curator of Paintings at the Museum, wrote to the National Academy Committee to convey the news that the Museum was going to carry out their suggestion, saying:

“To my great delight it was agreed to purchase the picture. . . . I need not tell you how delighted I am personally. I regard The Gulf Stream as one of the most typical and central creations of American art. . . . It is a great masterpiece and counts among the very finest that Winslow Homer has created.”

A note published in the Museum’s Bulletin for January 1907 by Bryson Burroughs describes the painting and remarks that “the ‘Gulf Stream’ would be ranked among his figure subjects, and no other work of his could better show his power in this direction. . . .

“This is a story-telling picture, and the story assumes the proportions of a great allegory if one chooses. If not, the rendering of the sea, and the sharks, the sunlit hulk, and the splendid figure, will suffice for the acceptance of the ‘Gulf Stream’ as one of the master works of contemporary art.

“The Museum is fortunate in securing this picture, and its acknowledgments are due to the Jury and Hanging Committee of the Academy Exhibition, at whose urgent suggestion the purchase was made.”

The newspaper accounts of the Academy exhibition contain interesting information about the painting and side lights on contemporary art criticism. Perhaps the most entertaining one is from the New York Press of December 23, 1906. “[The Gulf Stream] is head and shoulders over everything in the rooms. . . . Winslow Homer’s composition has the distinction in addition to its merits as a piece of wonderful craftsmanship and its tragic story, of being the first canvas that was ever purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art at an Academy show. It is a marine and depicts a small sloop that has been dismasted by a tropical squall. . . . Pictorially this is all striking enough, but technically the painting is even more remarkable. The introduction of the note of brilliant red in the foreground, on the rail of the sloop [actually it


Gift of Mrs. William F. Milton, 1923
is on the waterline] is a masterly stroke that kept a crowd of artists before the canvas all day long on Friday in open admiration of Homer's genius for color. The Museum of Art begins its recognition of native art brilliantly in this purchase.”

This last was a quite unjustified remark since at the time it was written the Museum reputations have increased over the intervening years.

Of related interest is the fact that George A. Hearn earlier in the year had offered the Museum two superb Homer canvases which were accepted by the Trustees. (He gave still another four years later.) He had also provided the Mu-


Gift of George A. Hearn, 1910

must have owned more than a hundred paintings by American artists. Some, to be sure, were by men and women whose reputation has long since faded. On the other hand, in 1906 the collections already included fine work by Matthew Pratt, Benjamin West, Gilbert Stuart, William Sidney Mount, George Inness, Homer D. Martin, John Singer Sargent, and many others whose
ness and noteworthy brevity he wrote on April 11, 1907, from Maine:

“I have not been home here since Feb'y 8th—I now find on my return a very fine reproduction of my picture ‘the Gulf Stream’—I am truly very grateful for it—& consider it a great compliment—

Yours very truly,
Winslow Homer.”

A special feature of the exhibition was the showing of a number of Homer’s water-color sketches, including that extraordinary group of some sixteen pictures which he had refused to sell during his lifetime. For several years before the artist’s death the Museum had been negotiating with him to acquire some of these. After his death his brother, the executor of his estate, offered the Museum its choice of any or all of them and from the group the Museum selected

twelve. When the Museum was trying to buy these pictures from the artist Homer wrote the following letter, addressed to Bryson Burroughs, then Assistant Curator of Paintings, and dated Scarboro, Maine, November 4, 1909:

“My dear Sir
The water colors that you refer to are still hanging on my wall—I think of you and the Museum when I happen to look at them & I never forget

Shooting the Rapids, Saguenay River. This is Winslow Homer’s last, unfinished canvas. Oil on canvas. Height 30 inches.
Gift of Charles S. Homer, 1911

One of the major events of the art season in 1911 was the Metropolitan Museum’s memorial exhibition of the work of Winslow Homer. Arranged with the cooperation of the artist’s brother, Charles S. Homer, it contained fifty-one paintings lent from various collections and museums. Homer’s last, unfinished canvas, Shooting the Rapids, Saguenay River, also in the exhibition, was given to the Museum that year by the artist’s brother.
that I have promised to submit them to you before offering them to any other party—

“I shall not put them out [i.e. offer them for sale] until they are framed in a dignified & proper manner in keeping with the pictures.

“I am not in any hurry & I am sure to notify you

Res/y

Winslow Homer.”

Further details about this famous group of water colors are given in the Museum’s Bulletin for February 1911. Since this issue may not be at hand for most of our readers we take the liberty of quoting from that now rare volume.

“It was stated in the last Bulletin that the Memorial Exhibition of Winslow Homer’s works would include a selection from the water colors which were in the artist’s studio at Prout’s Neck, Scarboro, Maine, at the time of his death. Homer regarded these water colors as the best that he had done, and at the time of the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, in 1901, he chose to be represented there only by a group of his Bermuda and Bahama water colors.

“At various times the artist refused to dispose of any of them, having it in mind, it is understood, to offer them to some permanent collection where the majority could be kept together and form a public record of his accomplishment in this medium. Some time before his death, at our solicitation, he agreed that the Metropolitan Museum should have the first choice, but at the time of his death nothing had been done in the matter.

“Mr. C. S. Homer, the artist’s brother, who is the executor of his estate, being cognizant of Winslow Homer’s wishes as to the disposal of these works, consented to let the Museum have them on very generous terms. Of the sixteen pictures which made up the group, the Museum has purchased twelve, and these are now on view for the first time in the Homer Memorial Exhibition.

“Winslow Homer’s water colors show, even more than his oils, his skill and mastery over material. . . .

“These water colors which the Museum has bought are of his late period extending from about 1898 to the Key West pictures of 1903. They show the full development of his work and,
The Guard House. Lithograph published by Prang.

Gift of J. R. Burdick, 1947

Caricature self-portrait of the artist. Lithograph published by L. Prang and Co. in 1864.

Gift of J. R. Burdick, 1947
with the five oil paintings which the Museum owns, give a fair idea of the quality of his unique talent."

Turning from the paintings and water colors to examine the Winslow Homer prints and illustrations we find that the Museum's print collection contains about 160 wood engravings and lithographs designed by him. These include most of his well-known illustrations published between 1858 and 1875 in Harper's Weekly, Ballou's Pictorial, Appleton's Journal, Every Saturday, and other periodicals. Valuable as these are historically for their picture of the Civil War era and the years that followed, they have the additional importance of recording the artistic influences which Homer molded into his own distinctive style.

Among the lithographs are examples of Homer's work when he was an apprentice to Bufford's in Boston—for instance, several of his designs for sheet-music covers. One very rare lithograph by Homer is a caricature, his only known self-portrait. This appears on one of the small cards issued in a series in 1864 by Prang and titled Life in Camp. Whether these cards were issued as trade cards or as cigarette cards is not clear. There are twelve cards in each set. The caricature self-portrait is titled Our Special and, since it shows Homer seated on a cannon sketching, this probably means that it is a portrait of "our special correspondent." The other cards illustrate with a slight humorous touch the joys and miseries of life in a military camp and on the field of battle as well as the pleasures of the soldier at home on furlough. At least one of these subjects was used as the basis for an oil painting, The Guard House (now in the Canajoharie Art Gallery, Canajoharie, N. Y.).
Of further interest are the two large color lithographs later issued by Prang, in the 1890s, titled Eastern Shore and North Woods, which reproduce Homer water colors. In the Print Department there is an autograph letter from Homer to Louis Prang regarding the color corrections for the reproduction of North Woods. This is dated Scarboro, Maine, October 8, 1895 and reads:

"Dear Friend Prang
The proof of that water color is so fine that [I] do not dare criticize it. It is fine from the fact that every part is in keeping with the whole & directly one part is changed it must all be gone over again. & never will it look better to me than it is at present. This is to be looked at as a water color framed and hanging up—There are two things only that I would suggest if they agree with my original of this print. One is, that there should be a highlight on some part of the hat. [Here Homer has sketched the problem.] Another and the only positive fault as the picture now stands is that a line must be drawn on the outside line of the wrist of the figure. [Another drawing is interpolated here.] A very small short line that is there now, but not quite strong enough.

"I have returned proof by Express to-day, make no change in this unless what I have written agrees with my original drawing. I will make the drawing for the catalogue. Send the stone. Your publication modern art is very fine—"

It is part of the Homer legend that he lived and worked in virtual solitude. As a personal commentary on this aspect of his reputation, the artist appended to the preceding letter the following note:

"You mention again my ‘solitude.’ Now you
are quite mistaken I am working with a gang of men on a road I am building, I shall blast tomorrow. In fact I have little time to attend to my painting.

Yours very truly
Winslow Homer

Of the eight large etchings by Homer six are to be found in the Print Department’s portfolios: Eight Bells; Fly Fishing, Saranac; The Life Line; Mending the Tears; The Perils of the Sea; and Saved. The etched steel plates from which five of these were printed in the original edition are also in the Print Department. Although the etchings never have been popular, Homer thought of them as among his finest achievements.

This does not exhaust the list of our Homer treasures for, rounding out the collection of prints, there are a dozen or so books having one or more of his illustrations. It may be said that this collection of Homer’s work—the letters, the prints, the water colors, drawings, oil paintings, and book illustrations—comprises a very impressive group. It contains practically everything the serious student of Winslow Homer might desire to illuminate and expand his view of the subject. However, because of Homer’s selective skill and his mastery of his art, general interest in his work will never be confined solely to students of American art history. Homer’s pictures are not mere historical documents. They reflect in the most felicitous way important aspects of the heart and mind of our country. It is perhaps this particular virtue in Homer’s work that lifts him well above so many of his contemporaries and surely it is this which gives his pictures their enduring popularity with a wide public.
