Exhibitions

Works by Sargent and Homer

Homer exhibition opens February 22

A modest-sized changing exhibition gallery is one of a curator’s best and most welcome vehicles for communicating with the museum-going public. There he can display recent acquisitions before they are hung with the permanent collections, as well as less important works of interest that are not regularly shown, or those, such as watercolors, whose condition is too delicate for continuous display. He may often borrow from other Museum departments to create a well-rounded presentation of an individual artist, movement, or theme in a small, easily comprehended exhibition. Flexibility and simplicity of installation are the keys to using this type of gallery space. It is a delight and a challenge to the curator to share the broad range of his collections with visitors, to explore ideas that do not call for a full-scale exhibition – in effect, to treat the gallery as a research laboratory or, on occasion, as a curatorial gymnasium. The public benefits by seeing little-known works of art as well as old favorites in a new light, and by having available a variation from the permanent installations. Because the value of such changing exhibition rooms is so clearcut, it is Museum policy to provide one in each series of galleries to be renovated under the architectural plan for our second century.

The first show in the changing exhibition room of the recently opened American Paintings and Sculpture Galleries was devoted to a selection of our most beautiful watercolors and drawings of the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries. The second exhibition featured forty-three watercolors and drawings by John Singer Sargent. For most museum goers, Sargent’s name brings to mind his splendid Edwardian portraits but this display showed the artist’s attachment to other less imposing subjects and his fluency as a watercolorist and draughtsman. Ranging from brilliant landscapes to sketches made on World War I battlefields, these works provide new insights into Sargent the artist and Sargent the man, especially since they include eight of the ten watercolors that he personally selected for acquisition by the Metropolitan Museum.

The next exhibition, Winslow Homer: A Selection of Watercolors, Drawings, and Prints from the Metropolitan, allows for the same kind of in-depth examination of an outstanding American artist. Like the Sargent show, it includes pieces judged by Homer himself to be his best work. Executed in Bermuda and the Bahamas between 1898 and 1903, these are among the watercolor seascapes for which the artist is best known. But the show also contains the prints on which Homer’s early fame rested: published between 1858 and 1875 in such periodicals as Harper’s Weekly and Appleton’s Journal, they demonstrate his ability in genre and as a reporter during the Civil War. This show is a revealing supplement to his paintings that hang in the adjoining galleries: together all these pictures give testimony to his greatness.

John K. Howat
Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture

Although Sargent worked in watercolor throughout his life, it did not become a favorite medium until after 1900, when he was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the portraiture for which he was best known. Watercolor painting provided him a form of relaxation and freedom from the restrictions imposed by commissioned portraits.

One of ten watercolors selected by the artist from his best works and purchased by the Museum in 1915, In the Generalife was painted about 1912 in Granada, Spain. Three figures in the foreground – Jane de Glehn, wife of Sargent’s friend and fellow artist, his sister Emily Sargent at the easel, and a Spanish woman identified only as Dolores – provide an interesting contrast as portrait and character studies. A brilliant light source from the upper right reduces Emily Sargent’s features to barely suggested planes, illuminates the pensive and absorbed face of the fashionable Mrs. de Glehn, and leaves

In the Generalife, by John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), American. Watercolor, 14⅔ x 17⅞ inches. Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 15.142.8
Dolores, the most sharply defined and penetrating character study of the group, in complete shadow. Demonstrating Sargent’s preoccupation with light effects, his economical use of brushstrokes in the creation of form, and his skillful structuring of a composition, In the Generalife exhibits the technical brilliance typical of the artist’s best watercolors.

In 1881 Homer made his second trip abroad, settling in England near Tynemouth, not far from Newcastle. His oils and watercolors of this period captured the drama provided by the hazardous daily life of North Sea fishermen and their families. Inside the Bar, Tynemouth, although executed after the artist’s return to America (it is dated 1883), is based on such material. Homer’s monumental and idealized conception of Tynemouth women is a characteristic feature of his English studies, adding a melodramatic note abandoned in his later marine paintings. One appears here as the focal point of a studied composition, silhouetted against a turbulent sea and lowering sky. Her billowing apron finds a curious echo in the sail of the boat at the left. Working in blue, brown, and gray washes, the artist records the changing climatic conditions of the North Sea coast, anticipating the powerful marine paintings of his later years.

Natalie Spassky