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Fine Art

**WINSLOW HOMER** (1836-1910)

*Autumn Trees*, 1878

Watercolor on paper

13 5/8 x 20 1/4 inches

Inscribed lower left: Winslow Homer 1878

**PROVENANCE:** Wm. A. Butters & Co., Chicago, 10 Dec. 1879; to Cornelia Lunt, Evanston, IL, probably 1879; to Anne Evans, by bequest, n.d.; to Denver Art Museum, by bequest, 1941; to M. Knoedler & Co., 1947; to unidentified auction, Meredith Galleries, 1947; to Milch Galleries, 1947; to private collection, 1956; to private collection, after 1961.

**EXHIBITIONS:** Century Association, New York, 11 Jan. 1879, no. 51 (as *Old Oaks*); American Watercolor Society 1879, no. 388 (as *Oak Trees*), Boston Art Club, Boston Society of Architects; Schools at the Museum of Fine Arts, *Exhibition of Contemporary Art*, 22 Apr—24 May 1879, no. 688 (as *Oak Trees*); Butters, Chicago, 1879; Katonah, 1963, no. 9.

**REFERENCES:** “Fine Arts. Water Color Exhibition Fifth and Concluding Notice—The Corridor and Black and White Room.” *New York Herald*. 24 Feb. 1879.; Lloyd Goodrich et. al., *Record of Works by Winslow Homer*, (New York: Spanierman Gallery, 2005-2014) vol. III, no. 745, illus.

Winslow Homer, the noted landscape painter and printmaker, is one of the foremost figures in nineteenth century American art. Having made quite a name for himself as a painter of marine subjects, the self-taught artist's oeuvre extends far beyond these paradigmatic examples; the scope of his work is extensive in its breadth and depth, broaching a wide range of subject matter and traversing a range of mediums with ease.

*Autumn Trees* is a prime example of one of Homer's mid-career watercolors. Though prior to the 1870s Homer had employed the medium only intermittently, the year of 1873 marked a turning point in his use of the medium. From this point, works in watercolor suddenly came to encompass the majority of his output, and the following year marked Homer's first exhibition at the American Society of Painters in Watercolors; shortly thereafter, he became a full member.

*Autumn Trees*, executed five years into Homer's mastery of the medium, was probably originally entitled *Oak Trees*. A piece by this name was exhibited in the 1879 American Water Color Society exhibition, and was the second-highest priced Homer work (\$300). In a review of the show, the



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*New York Herald* mentions the piece by name:

.... Mr. Homer's 'October' (387), 'Oak Trees' (388), 'Corn' (401), 'Girl and Boat' (408) and his very admirable 'Willows' (414) are distinctly impressions and excellent works, and not intentions, as somebody has well entitled Mr. Currier's contributions.

*Autumn Trees* is one of several tree studies Homer painted during the autumn of 1878; others include works such as *Waverly Oaks* and *The Chestnut Tree*. Homer painted these scenes in either Hurley or Leeds, New York, where he was known to have visited, sketched and painted in October of that year.



Winslow Homer, *Waverly Oaks*, 1878, Watercolor, 13 x 20 ¼ inches, Inscribed lower right: Homer 1878, Private Collection [Black-and-white reproduction]



Winslow Homer, *The Chestnut Tree*, 1878, Watercolor, 14 x 20 inches, Inscribed lower left: Winslow Homer 1878, Private Collection [Black-and-white reproduction]

Homer first began frequenting Hurley and Leeds in the early 1870s. The two villages were important sites, providing Homer with ample fodder for his nostalgic yet realist scenes of rural life. *Snap the Whip* (1872), Homer's iconic painting of boys at play outside of their schoolhouse, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is believed to have been painted from sketches Homer executed while in Hurley. *Crossing the Pasture* (1871-2), now in the collection of the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, was similarly painted from summer sketches. Leeds, on the other hand, not only provided Homer with the subject matter for such works as *Twilight at Leeds, New York* (1876), now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, but was similarly



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frequented by a number of contemporaneous artists, including James Renwick Brevoort (1831-1918) and George Inness (1825-1894).

*Autumn Trees* is an excellent example of Homer's distinct style, which owes little to other artists or outside influences. The massive oak trees that make up the painting's central composition are rendered in rich earth tones of red and green, with hardy textures complemented by the lush expanse of field that stretches between the treeline and the viewer. Homer's treatment of paint is exacting, and the masterful blending of color and brushstroke is a testament to his years-long devotion to the medium. Homer's technique at large, characterized by careful and direct observation from nature, as well as a keen engagement with light effects and form, developed a careful approach to representation that time and time again culminated in honest depictions of his subject matter.

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A native Bostonian, Homer was born in 1836 and attended school in Cambridge. His mother, a watercolor painter in her own right, likely taught Homer to paint and later encouraged his professional pursuits. After graduating high school, Homer entered into an apprenticeship at J. H. Bufford, a local lithographic firm, where he remained for two years. In 1857 Homer left his apprenticeship to move to New York. He supported himself as a freelance illustrator, producing drawings which appeared in weekly publications—such as *Ballou's* and *Harper's Weekly*. Homer, who had no formal artistic training, built his experience on his apprenticeship at Bufford's and enrolled in night classes at the National Academy of Design. In addition, he was able to arrange a month of study with the French genre painter Frederick Rondel (1826-1892), who was living in New York at that time.

With the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, Homer was employed as an artist correspondent for *Harper's Weekly*, during which time he produced series of illustrations depicting daily life at camp. From 1863 on, Homer exhibited regularly at the National Academy of Design, and was eventually elected an academician (1865). Homer's most notable painting of the Civil War, *Prisoners from the Front*, was completed the following year; it was exhibited at the National Academy (1866), as well as at the Exposition Universelle in Paris (1867), effectively establishing Homer's reputation.



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Homer traveled abroad in 1866, spending much of his time in France. Though little is known of the time he spent there, it is likely that he spent a great deal of time taking in contemporaneous art movements and integrating himself into Parisian artist circles. After returning to New York the following year, Homer established his studio in the Tenth Street Studio Building and became a founding member of the Tile Club. Although he lived in New York City for nearly two decades, the city itself did not tend to enter into his artwork. Instead, Homer made frequent summer trips to the White Mountains of New Hampshire, Lake George, Saratoga, and the Adirondacks in upstate New York, and Long Branch in New Jersey in search of subject matter. Homer often integrated children into his scenes of rural life, eschewing the over-wrought sentimentality of many genre painters in favor of a gentle realism.

Homer spent two years in England in the early 1880s, at Cullercoats, where he produced numerous studies of village and fisherman life. After returning again to the United States, Homer settled in Prouts Neck, Maine. He remained there for the rest of his life, venturing south during the winters to warmer locales such as Cuba, Florida, Nassau and Bermuda. Homer died in Prouts Neck in 1910, at the age of seventy-four.