



WINSLOW HOMER

A Visit from the Old Mistress, 1876

WINSLOW HOMER (1836–1910)

A Visit from the Old Mistress, 1876

oil on canvas, 18 × 24 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of William T. Evans

Background Information for Teachers

Winslow Homer's *Visit from the Old Mistress* captures the tense encounter between a group of recently emancipated women and their former mistress in the years following the Civil War. This period, known as Reconstruction, opened a new and difficult chapter in race relations. Through the artwork's composition, Homer conveys the uncertainty of this complicated time in American history. The scene takes place in the women's humble home. Their former mistress has just entered, her lace-trimmed black gown setting her apart as an outsider. She stands rigidly in profile, turned toward her former slaves.

The black women and child stare directly at their visitor with unwelcoming expressions. One of the women does not rise from her seat, a change in protocol from the obedient behavior expected. The women are physically separate from their former mistress, the space between them suggesting that a racial divide continues after the end of the war. Homer originally painted a red flower in the mistress's right hand, perhaps signifying friendship. He later painted over the flower, which does not appear in the final composition. This image of a mistress and her former slaves embodies the unspoken tension between two communities seeking to understand their future. The

formal equivalence among the standing figures suggests the balance that the nation hoped to find in the difficult years of Reconstruction.

Guided Looking Questions for Students

- Describe the way the artist composed the scene. How are the women presented to us?
- What do our observations of the women tell us about their life circumstances? Consider body language, clothing, and living quarters.
- In the final composition, Homer painted over the flower in the mistress's hand — seemingly a gesture of friendship. Why do you think he made that choice? How would the tone of the mistress's greeting have changed if he had left the flower?

Primary Source Connection

Pair this artwork with the excerpt below from *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864–1865*, by Eliza Frances Andrews. Her journal, written from the point of view of a former slave owner, recounts her experiences of the end of the Civil War and the beginning of Reconstruction in the state of Georgia.

Arch has "taken freedom" and left us, so we have no man-servant in the dining-room. Sidney, Garnett's boy, either ran away, or was captured in Virginia. To do Arch justice, he didn't go without asking father's permission, but it is a surprise that he, who was so devoted to "Marse Fred," should be the very first of the house servants to go... I feel sorry for the poor negroes. They are not to

blame for taking freedom when it is brought to their very doors and almost forced upon them. Anybody would do the same, still when they go I can't help feeling as if they are deserting us for the enemy, and it seems humiliating to be compelled to bargain and haggle with our own servants about wages. I am really attached to father's negroes, and even when they leave us, as Alfred, Arch, and Harrison have done, cannot help feeling interested in their welfare and hoping they will find good places.

Suggested Questions

- Why do you think Eliza believes that freedom is being "forced upon" her family's former slaves? Which lines in the passage support your answer?
- Does this reading change your interpretation of Homer's painting? Why or why not? What do the artwork and reading tell us about the challenges black and white Southerners faced in the post-war period?

Literary Connection

Pair this artwork with Jordan Anderson's dictated letter, excerpted below, to his former master, Colonel P. H. Anderson, dated August 7, 1865. The letter, one of the first published examples of direct and satiric writing by an African American, appeared in a Dayton, Ohio, newspaper that same month. Colonel Anderson had written to his former slave Jordan, requesting that he come back to work on his farm. Since his emancipation, Jordan and his family had moved to Dayton — a city with a long-established free black community.

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Although the letter is a historic artifact, students should also analyze it as a piece of literature.

Sir: I got your letter, and was glad to find that you had not forgotten Jordan, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this, for harboring Rebs they found at your house....I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerably well here; I get \$25 a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy, — the folks here call her Mrs. Anderson), — and the children — Milly, Jane and Grundy — go to school and are learning well... Now, if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again.

Suggested Questions

- ▶ How does Jordan Anderson convey that he is not interested in Colonel Anderson's offer?
- ▶ Compare Jordan's description of life as a free man in Ohio to Homer's depiction of free women in the South. What main differences can you infer from these verbal and visual descriptions?

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