

## **Activity: Observe and Interpret**

*Artists make choices in communicating ideas. What information can we learn about post-Civil War life from this painting? How does Winslow Homer portray the relationship between formerly enslaved women and their former mistress? Observing details and analyzing components of the painting, then putting them in historical context, enables the viewer to interpret the overall message of the work of art.*

### **Observation: What do you see?**



**Describe the way the artist composed the scene. How are the women presented to us?**

The scene takes place in the humble home of a group of African American women. Their former mistress has presumably just entered. She stands rigidly in profile, turned towards her former slaves. All of the black women, including the toddler, stare directly at their visitor with unwelcoming expressions. The standing women are of similar heights, placing

them on equal footing with each other. However, the women are separated from their visitor physically. The space between the figures and their former mistress suggest that a racial divide continues. The central figure faces the viewer, her solid figure anchoring the composition. Her head turns toward the mistress; their eyes meet on an equal level.

**What do the figures tell us about their life circumstances?**

All of the African American figures wear earth tones that reflect the browns of the walls and the orange glow of the fireplace. In contrast, the mistress wears a formal black gown with lace trim, setting her apart as an outsider. She dangles a closed, red fan by her side. Homer originally painted a red carnation in her right hand, perhaps as a gesture of friendship. He painted over the flower, however, and it does not appear in the final composition. Why do you think he made



that choice? How would the tone of the mistress' greeting have changed if he had left the flower intact?



**Two of the women in the painting have something unexpected in common. Can you identify what it is?**

The woman holding the child wears a wedding ring on her finger, as does her former mistress. Although Homer expresses the African American woman's ring with just a tiny fleck of gold, its impact is unmistakable. In many cases, enslaved men and women were not allowed to marry, and families were often separated and sold at their master's whim, sometimes to other states. Following the Emancipation Proclamation, former slaves rushed to reunite with their families and formalize their unions through legal marriage.

Homer calls our attention to the wedding ring on the finger of the mistress, putting them on equal status as far as the rite to marriage is concerned.

### **Interpretation: What does it mean?**

Winslow Homer captures a tense encounter between a group of freed slaves and their former mistress following the Civil War. The period of Reconstruction opened a difficult new chapter in race relations in our country. Homer is able to convey the uncertainty of this complicated time in American history through a simple composition. What might be the purpose of this visit? Homer leaves us with more questions than answers.



[A Visit from the Old Mistress](#), 1876, Winslow Homer, oil on canvas, Smithsonian American Art Museum