Cover Art

A fleeting rest from the battle

Winslow Homer, The Bright Side, 1865. Oil on canvas. Credit for the journal cover image and the image above: gift of Mr and Mrs John D Rockefeller 3rd.

A bright ray of sun shines down on three African American men dozing against their tent. One more man sticks his head into the outside, hovering over them, and looks straight back at the viewer. We’re transported to 1865 toward the end of the American Civil War, between battles. These men are Union Army teamsters, wagon masters, the drivers of teams of animals, taking a rest from their hard labor. Behind them, their horses do the same. The painting is by celebrated American artist Winslow Homer, who in his early years shaped the North’s way of seeing life on the battlefield.1,2

Winslow Homer was a self-taught artist born in Boston in 1836. Before achieving fame as an artist, he worked for Harper’s Weekly. By the 1860s, at the height of the Civil War, photography was not yet widely used, and the only option to “see” what life was like on the front was to employ artists. Homer was one of about 30 artist-reporters during the war, who together produced about 6000 images, making the Civil War America’s most illustrated battle.3

Artist-reporters were chosen for their skill in drawing, but also for their ability to conjure a scene. The images that they created had to be able to tell a story within themselves.4 Homer saw himself as one of the infantry; he grew his mustache and beard like the rest of them, and he underwent many of the same struggles and deprivations. Through his grueling experience and hard labor, Homer developed a distinctive style that set him apart from his contemporaries.5 This painting is exemplary of his work in the 1860s—he used delicate, small brushstrokes and a great variety of brilliant blues and reds, bringing together warm and cool tones. He brought the horizon line close to the top edge of the painting. This worked to stretch time, exploding the moment he was working in.4 He was inspired by ukiyo-e prints from Japan, or “floating world” scenes, which capture a fleeting moment.5 The foreground of the picture is quite dark, with a bright sky behind it, the inverse of the usual bright object with a dark background.4 Inverting light and dark is one of many reasons that this and Homer’s other paintings made a stir when they were first exhibited in galleries.

In The Bright Side, Homer showed black American soldiers, which was very uncommon even among the other artist-reporters on the front lines of the Civil War. He gained notoriety for his decision to include them in his work and, from some of the less tolerant critics, some raising of the eyebrows.5 His sympathetic portrayal of black soldiers added subtly subversive messages in his work at a time the nation was fractured over the issue of slavery.

Why does Homer show the teamsters sleeping against their tent? Who is the man peeking out, and why does he stare so directly back at the viewer? Homer may have been trying to show his view of a quick moment that he saw at the encampment. The soldiers are resting in the “bright side” of the tent. Some have guessed that they are freed slaves from the South, resting after their journey to the North, who are back on the “bright side” of life and, thus, freedom. They were, however, the “property” of the Union army. Slavery was still legal in much of the United States, and they were likely not truly free. The teamsters have this moment, however, to bask in the sun, between tasks, to rest from their wearying work. Their horses are wandering behind them, or possibly dozing, near their Conestoga wagons.5 One man, however, is not sleeping. The man who looks back at the viewer seems like he’s trying to communicate something about the lives of himself and his comrades. Perhaps he is a sentinel, protecting the vulnerable sleeping men.6 He wants the rest of the world to see and to understand: things are rarely as simple as they appear.

Disclosures

The authors have declared that they have nothing to disclose.

References


CALL FOR CHAPTER PROPOSALS

Textbook title: Foundations for Sleep Health
Deadline: February 28, 2018

The National Sleep Foundation (NSF) and Elsevier are developing the first sleep health textbook, Foundations for Sleep Health (“Foundations”). F. Javier Nieto, MD, PhD, MPH, MHS is Editor. Foundations will advance the contemporary theories and global practices of sleep health for public health and medical school students. It will also serve as a foundational reference for the sleep health community.

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- The Effect of Friends and Other Social Networks on Sleep
- How Work Can Affect Sleep Health, and Vice Versa
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