

## Winslow Homer's *The Lookout – 'All's Well'*: Time, Order, and the Night Sky in a Later Nineteenth Century Painting

---

Gary Wells

**Abstract.** Winslow Homer's 1896 painting *The Lookout – 'All's Well'* features a night sky with three prominent stars. As an unusual image for the artist, the painting raises interesting questions about appearance and meaning in the depiction of the starry sky. It reflects the artist's relationship to and knowledge of other painters of the night sky in the nineteenth-century in form and iconography. This paper suggests that Homer combined close observation with a partly fictive rendering of the sky to express his interest in orderliness and a personal sense of place in the cosmos.

The painting is *The Lookout – 'All's Well'* by the American painter Winslow Homer, dating from 1896.<sup>1</sup> A sailor announces the hour of the watch at night, accompanied by the ringing of the ship's bell that is shown prominently in the composition. The deck of the ship tilts to indicate the movement of the water, and the bell itself reflects a light, perhaps the moon, to become the focal point of the composition. Behind, the night sky holds a flattened triangle of three stars above a bank of distant clouds.

Those three stars prompt reflection on a larger significance for the painting. Initially, I would suggest that we see this work in the context of the nineteenth-century Realist tradition in American and European painting, to which Winslow Homer is an important contributor. In that light, we see an ordinary moment in the life of sea-faring men as documentary fact and disconnected from deeper narratives or symbolic values. The astronomical element of the work is, in this situation, simply the literal background to the scene which sets the physical and temporal

---

<sup>1</sup> Winslow Homer, *The Lookout – 'All's Well'*, 1896, Oil on canvas, 101.28 x 76.52 cm (39 7/8 x 30 1/8 inches), Museum of Fine Arts Boston, MA. Warren Collection—William Wilkins Warren Fund, 99.23.

---

Gary Wells, 'Winslow Homer's *The Lookout – 'All's Well'*: Time, Order, and the Night Sky in a Later Nineteenth Century Painting', *Culture and Cosmos*, Vol. 27 no. 1, Spring/Summer 2023, pp. 117-134.

[www.CultureAndCosmos.org](http://www.CultureAndCosmos.org)

136 Winslow Homer's *The Lookout – 'All's Well'*:

Time, Order, and the Night Sky in a Later Nineteenth Century Painting

stage of the foreground action. If this is the case, then our astronomical interpretation is done.



Fig. 1. Winslow Homer, *The Lookout – 'All's Well'*, 1896, oil on canvas, 101.28 x 76.52 cm (39 7/8 x 30 1/8 in.), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Warren Collection—William Wilkins Warren Fund, Accession Number 99.23. Photograph © 2023 [Museum of Fine Arts Boston](https://www.museumoffinearts.org/).

But this direct reading seems unsatisfying. What actual three stars do these represent? Why is their arrangement so geometrically insistent within the composition? What purpose do they serve in the environment of the scene beyond being an index of 'night'? Upon closer inspection, the painting has several puzzling elements. The taffrail behind the sailor abruptly disappears to the left. The bell sports an unusually ornate design. The viewpoint is tightly cropped. The stars are equally bright, and their arrangement echoes the overall structure of the composition rather than a particular constellation or asterism. It is difficult to reconcile the appearance of the stars with their position in the sky or for that matter with what the artist could have observed from the location where he worked. Further, this is the only painting by Homer where stars are plainly visible. His many nocturnes and night scenes often show the moon, or at least moonlight, playing upon land and water. But his usual method is to emphasize the featureless dark sky in contrast to the bright moon, or to some source of light like a lighthouse or other artificial beacon.

We know, from his first biographer William Howe Downes, that Homer made considerable effort for some of the visual elements of this painting, such as crafting a model of the ship's bell after a search for examples failed to turn up exactly what he wanted.<sup>2</sup> He also boarded ships to make sketches of the decks in night-time conditions. Downes also claimed, in the same passage, that the painting itself was done entirely at night by moonlight. This followed an earlier experiment in painting a night scene in darkness that resulted in *Moonlight, Wood Island Light* (1894).<sup>3</sup> While the earlier painting is a rapid, painterly sketch of the rocky shore and breaking waves, *The Lookout* is more finished and detailed, suggesting a longer painting process that, if done *plein air*, must have extended over several days. This again begs the question: are the stars in *The Lookout* something observed or are they constructed to fit the needs of the composition, like the elaborate bell?

---

<sup>2</sup> William Howe Downes, *The Life and Works of Winslow Homer* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, 1911), p.182.

<sup>3</sup> Winslow Homer, *Moonlight, Wood Island Light*, 1894, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, Oil on canvas, 30 3/4 x 40 1/4 inches (78.1 x 102.2 cm). Gift of George A. Hearn, in memory of Arthur Hoppock Hearn, 1911, 11.116.2.

138 Winslow Homer's *The Lookout – 'All's Well'*:

Time, Order, and the Night Sky in a Later Nineteenth Century Painting



Fig. 2. Winslow Homer, *Moonlight, Wood Island Light*, 1894, oil on canvas, 30 3/4 x 40 1/4 inches (78.1 x 102.2 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY, Gift of George A. Hearn, in memory of Arthur Hoppock Hearn, 1911, Accession Number 11.116.2. Photograph published under CC0 Universal Public Domain.

There is something of a tradition in later nineteenth-century painting of showing the night sky in one of two extremes. One representation is the single star or the planet Venus, shining in the twilight of evening or dawn, or one or two stars and sometimes the moon, as seen in works like Jules Breton's *Shepherd's Star*, 1887.<sup>4</sup> Breton's work enjoyed great popularity in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century, and Homer was familiar with his paintings.<sup>5</sup> The other extreme is the depiction of a rich field of numerous stars, varying in brightness and giving the impression of celestial multitudes, found exuberantly in works like Vincent van Gogh's

---

<sup>4</sup> Jules Breton, *The Shepherd's Star*. oil on canvas, 1887. 40 1/2 by 31 inches. Gift of Arthur J. Secor, 1922.21.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Robertson, *Reckoning with Winslow Homer: His Late Paintings and Their Influence* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp.56–57.

famous 1889 *Starry Night* and more prosaically in works like Gustave Doré's *Mountain Landscape*, 1877.<sup>6</sup> The former depicts the natural rhythms of time in a rural or traditional world. The latter is a celebration of the vast energy of natural phenomena and the promise, or peril, of an infinite universe in a dynamic and modern world.



Fig. 3. Jules Breton, *The Shepherd's Star*, 1887, oil on canvas, 40 1/2 x 31 inches (102.8 x 78.7 cm), Toledo Museum of Art, OH, Gift of

---

<sup>6</sup> Vincent van Gogh, *Starry Night*, 1889, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, oil on canvas, 29 x 36 1/4 inches (73.7 x 92.1 cm). Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (by exchange). Conservation was made possible by the Bank of America Art Conservation Project, 472.1941; Gustave Doré, *Mountain Landscape*, 1877, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE, oil on canvas, 30 x 60 1/2 inches. Gift of Mrs. Lily Javits, 1948.23.

140 Winslow Homer's *The Lookout – 'All's Well'*:

Time, Order, and the Night Sky in a Later Nineteenth Century Painting

Arthur J. Secor, Object Number 1922.41. Photograph Google Cultural Institute Public Domain.

Homer's painting fits more comfortably at the structured and orderly end of this representational scale. The relationship of the triad of stars to the rhythms of sea-life – the bell, the calling of the watchman, the promise of disciplined rituals – is set against an oddly dynamic view of the tilting deck of the ship, with its strange, cropped framing. This view, perhaps influenced by the artist's knowledge of Ukiyo-e prints from Japan acquired through his friend and fellow artist John LaFarge, suggests something else at work in the image.<sup>7</sup> The tumult of the ocean, its restless movement and unpredictable nature, is implied by the asymmetry and dynamism of the scene, but it is also shifted outside the frame by the restricted viewpoint and made implicit rather than central. The stars suggest a reassuring orderliness, a structured constant against which the vagaries of nature and human experience are compared. The triangle they form echoes the tilting lines of the ship, but they also contrast as fixed points against the diagonal movement of the deck, mast, and rails below. The ornate bell is itself contradictory: an energetic swirl of baroque lines but a symbol of the regular passage of time aboard a ship. In comparison, the stars cap the scene with a serene and almost classical calm.

*The Lookout* is a continuation of a long series of paintings by Homer about the sea, fisherman, and sailors, dating back to 1880. The mood in many of these pictures is dominated by uncertainty, tension, and stoicism. Shipwrecks and perilous rescues punctuate the series, underscoring the drama and harsh reality of seafaring life. Parallel to these paintings of seafarers are the nocturnes of the 1880s, a series of images mostly of the Maine coastline by moonlight. The mood of the nocturnes, occasionally populated with the figures of women, is also marked by a certain mystery, awe, even an elegiac tone. Turbulent waves crashing into the rocky shore, fog banks, cloudy skies, all place us firmly into the physical realm of nature but retain a latent emotion. Rather than reading primarily as allegory (although that element is not totally absent in Homer's work), Homer's paintings of this period perhaps nudge us toward a more personal and visceral understanding of nature. Settling in Maine after travels to Europe and work in New York City, Homer placed himself close to nature and distanced himself from the urban and modern world. This retreat from the

---

<sup>7</sup> William R. Cross, *Winslow Homer: American Passage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022), p.171.



modern world was as much about finding the focus for his work as it was about solitude and self-sufficiency.

Winslow Homer's studio at Prout's Neck, Maine (N 43.53°, W 70.32°), is perched above the rocky shore of Saco Bay, opening to the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>8</sup> From the elevated porch of the studio, he had views to the south and east. The close views that Homer painted of the water and shoreline were made near his studio and oriented toward the water in a southerly direction, aligned with the east-west contour of the land at the end of Prout's Neck from Carrison Cove to Cannon Rock and eastward to South Cove. This view is clearly seen in *Moonlight*, *Wood Island Light*, where the Wood Island lighthouse is situated due south from the studio.

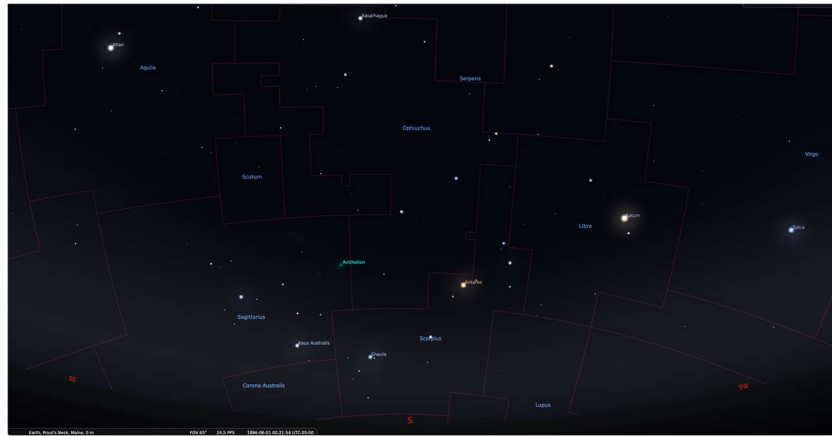


Fig. 4. The simulated night sky from Winslow Homer's studio at Prout's Neck, Maine, midnight, 1 June 1896. Generated in Stellarium v. 0.22.1.

If this is also the general backdrop of *The Lookout*, then the sky that Homer saw in the summer months of 1896 would have been filled by the central glow of the Milky Way, with the constellations of Scorpius and Sagittarius in view. Sagittarius could certainly be perceived as a bright triangle of stars but set among other almost equally bright stars in the surrounding region. A broader view of the southern sky from Homer's studio in the early summer would have included bright ruddy Antares in Scorpius, and further west, bluish Spica, roughly equal in brightness. Between them, after sunset

<sup>8</sup> Philip C. Beam, *Winslow Homer at Prout's Neck* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1966), pp.28–34.

142 Winslow Homer's *The Lookout* – 'All's Well':

Time, Order, and the Night Sky in a Later Nineteenth Century Painting

from early spring through summer in 1896, the yellowish disc of the planet Saturn would have been visible as well. But the alignment of Antares, Saturn and Spica would have appeared more like a line than a compact triangle, and they were more widely spaced than the three stars of the painting would imply.<sup>9</sup> In fact there does not appear to be any analogous arrangement of three equally bright stars that would have been distinctive against the larger backdrop of the sky. The painting does not hint at other stars, and the deep blue colour of the sky, along with the reflection on the ship's bell, suggest that moonlight is drowning out the dim stars and only allowing the brightest to be visible.

The three stars in *The Lookout* are painted in pure white pigment, almost equally bright and similar in size on the canvas. They are not painted as simple dots, but instead are irregular smudges that suggest the twinkling scintillation of starlight close to the horizon. This suggests that Homer was observing the natural appearance of stars, at least in behaviour, but neglecting or choosing not to represent the complex coloration of starlight passing through the dense atmosphere at low relative altitudes. Again, it might argue for a generic representation of stars in the night sky, rather than an exact one.

This returns us to the idea that the flattened triangle of stars in *The Lookout* are a compositional device rather than an observed phenomenon. Starting from observation, Homer moves to the invented, or at least to the constructed. The themes of sea voyages, time, and the rhythms of life, as Elizabeth Johns notes, visually defined a time in the artist's life when he could be both reflective and optimistic. As Johns points out, this work might be seen in relation to the 1886 painting *Eight Bells* that depicts a scene of sailors using a sextant to determine their position at sea, thus linking time and location.<sup>10</sup> *The Lookout* is explicitly about time and the navigational possibilities of sailing by the stars. As a pair, the two works touch upon the broad theme of temporal and spatial position with their autobiographical, or at least personal, expressive potential.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly,

---

<sup>9</sup> Information about these visualizations of the night sky from the location of Winslow Homer's studio have been derived from *Stellarium* v. 0.22.1.

<sup>10</sup> Winslow Homer, *Eight Bells*, 1886, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, 25 3/16 x 30 3/16 inches, oil on canvas. Gift of anonymous donor, 1930.379.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Johns, *Winslow Homer: The Nature of Observation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), pp.149–50.



Homer sold both *Eight Bells* and *The Lookout* directly to the same collector, Thomas Clarke.<sup>12</sup> If we understand these paintings as related, then it is clear the artist placed meaning above mere recording and leveraged the composition of the work as the mechanism of that meaning. This is hinted at by the artist when writing to Clarke in 1897: ‘...it would not be understood by any [one] but myself...’.<sup>13</sup> And Nikolai Cikovsky observes that this painting was created within a pervasive symbolist cultural moment as a possible reaction to ‘the discredited certainties of nineteenth-century realism, materialism, and science’.<sup>14</sup> Homer’s satisfaction with his position and outlook in the late 1890s might very well have recalled the night watch call of ‘all’s well’.

*The Lookout*– ‘*All’s Well*’ stands out as a somewhat exceptional work in Homer’s oeuvre. It is the only one of his paintings of the night sky where stars are plainly visible. The moon was the dominant astronomical feature of Homer’s night skies, either directly pictured or present as light from outside the frame. But in *The Lookout*, the scintillating trio of stars form a different vision of time, order, and the place of humans in an unforgiving natural world. The moon is relegated to a secondary role, and the stars emerge as the symbolic focus of the painting. *The Lookout* encourages the viewer to imagine the navigation of a personal journey, and the artist’s internal ordering and contentment with the course of life.

---

<sup>12</sup> Kevin M. Murphy, ‘Painting for Money: Winslow Homer as Entrepreneur,’ *Winterthur Portfolio* 37, no. 2/3 (Summer/Autumn 2002): p.150.

<sup>13</sup> Downes, p.185.

<sup>14</sup> Nicolai Cikovsky, Franklin Kelly, Judith Walsh, and Winslow Homer. *Winslow Homer* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p.250.