

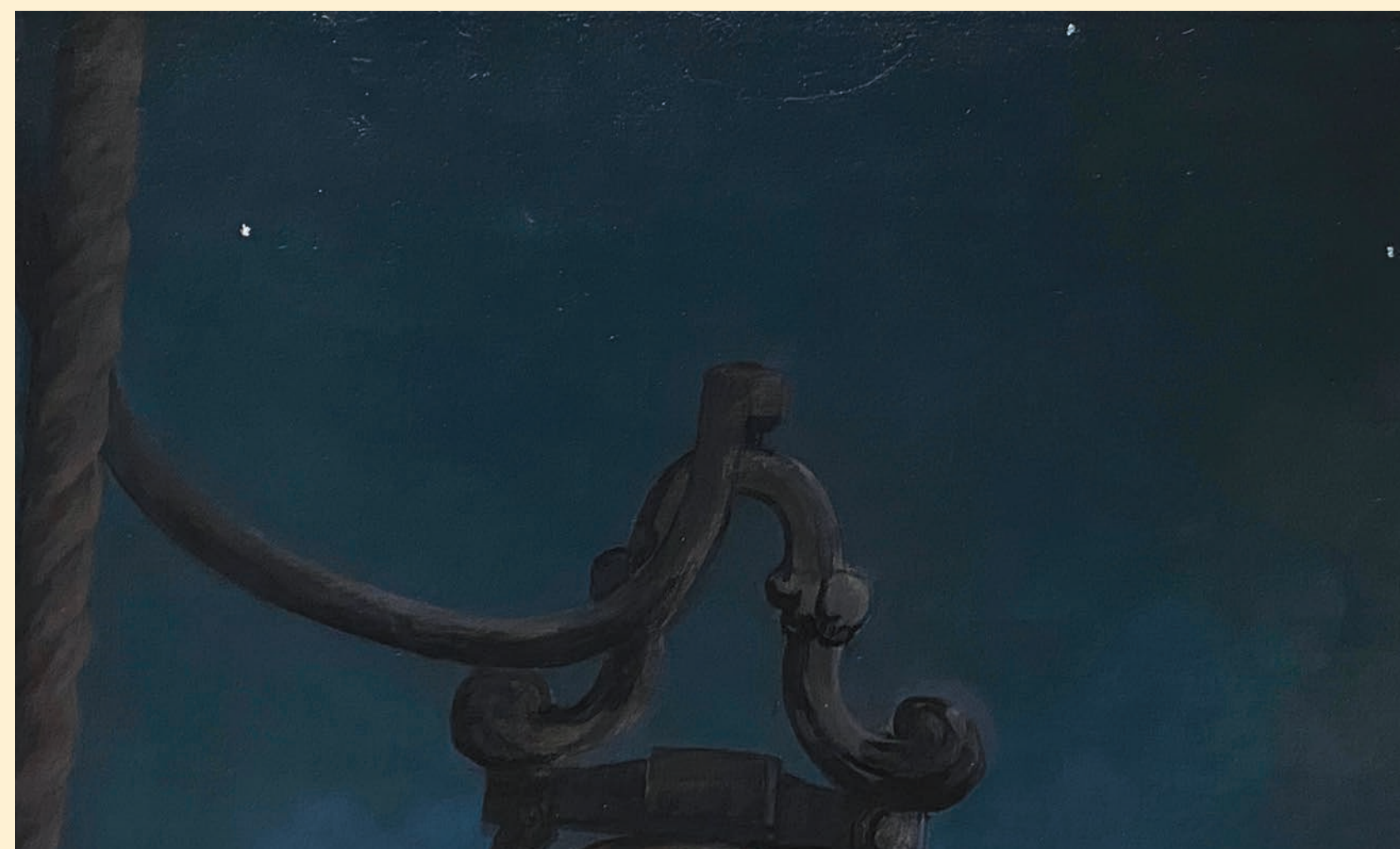
Winslow Homer's *The Lookout - "All's Well"*: Time, Order, and the Night Sky in Later Nineteenth Century Painting



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Winslow Homer, *The Lookout - "All's Well"*, 1896, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Winslow Homer, Detail, *The Lookout - "All's Well"*, 1896, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The painting is *The Lookout - "All's Well"* by the American painter Winslow Homer, dating from 1896. A sailor announces the hour of the watch at night, accompanied by the ringing of the ship's bell that is prominently shown 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 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 the sea as documentary fact and disconnected from deeper narratives or symbolic values. The astronomical element of the work is, in this context, simply the literal background to the scene which sets the physical and temporal stage of the foreground action. If this is the case, then our astronomical interpretation is done.

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 context 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 stars are equally bright, and their arrangement echoes the overall structure of the composition.

There is something of a tradition in later nineteenth-century painting of showing the night sky in two extremes. One representation is the single star, actually 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. The other extreme is the chaotic jumble of stars found in works like Van Gogh's famous 1889 *Starry Night* and more prosaically in works like Gustave Doré's *Mountain Landscape*, 1877. 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.

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, suggest something else at work in the image. 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 and made latent rather than central. The stars suggest a reassuring orderliness, a structured constant against which the vagaries of nature and human experience are compared.

The Lookout is a continuation of a long series of paintings by Homer about the sea, fisherman and sailors, dating to 1880. The mood in many of these pictures is dominated by uncertainty, tension, and stoicism. 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 but suggestive realm of nature. 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.

The Lookout stands out, however, as a somewhat exceptional work in Homer's oeuvre. It is the only painting of the night sky where stars are plainly visible. Among his many nocturnes and evening seascapes, the skies are usually indistinct, clouded over, or featureless. Moonlight illuminates rocky shores and rough waves, but it is a light from outside the frame of the painting in most cases. Here, the scintillating trio of stars form a unique vision of time, order and the place of humans in an unforgiving natural world.

Selected References:

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Jules Breton, *Shepherd's Star*, 1887, Toledo Museum of Art



Gustave Doré, *Mountain Landscape*, 1877, Joslyn Museum of Art, Omaha, Nebraska