

The constant avocation of my life has been the study of art. Indeed, I might be described as the arche-typal culture-vulture. I have haunted all the world's major museums except the Pinakothek in Dresden. From high school days I have collected postcards of the best paintings, arranging them and rearranging them into what might be called the "ideal museum."

—JAMES MICHENER

chapter

2

Postcards: Inside/Out

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This Is the Way It Used to Be

My college-level writing students, silent and somber, followed me up the grand staircase, through the massive arch, and into the main gallery of the art museum. They studied the colored maps as I explained the arrangement of the rooms beyond the velvet ropes. And then, in groups of threes and fours, they strolled down the halls, disappearing into the museum for what I presumed would be an adventure in seeing. I trailed along hoping to see what they saw. But I was never fast enough. I lost most of them immediately as they channel surfed their way from one gallery to another. Those that lingered seemed confused. Some were more impressed by the size of the rooms than by the paintings on the walls. Some were more interested in the words on the plaques than in the images in the frames, while still others stared quietly at each painting, and then, unable to decipher the message, drifted on to the next puzzle.

I made my way through the maze, seeing fewer and fewer students, until I got to the gift shop. And there they were, hunting for bargains among the calendars, posters, and postcards that featured the paintings they had just seen. But what was I seeing? The results of a museum culture that enshrined art in spaces that alienated observers? The results of a commercial culture that promoted shopping as the greatest good? Or something more subtle? The results of an information explosion that prompted individuals, overloaded by images and

words, to purchase a single token—a postcard that stood for *all that out there* that they could not understand?

This Is What We Did

I decided to play it their way. Instead of taking my writing students to the art museum, I brought the “gift shop” to them. I invited them to sort through a stack of postcards, select one they liked, and then use it for a journal assignment. The first time around, the assignment was fairly simple:

1. Free Write: Tape the postcard in your journal and then free write about it. For example, you may want to assume the identity of one of the characters in your painting and write about what you see.

The students began writing and did not stop until the end of class. When I picked up their journals, I noticed that each entry was over seven pages long. When I began reading them, I realized that their sketches explored the relationship between artist, subject, and observer. I could see that I had stumbled onto a powerful prompt, but I could not see how to use it.

By our next meeting, my students had it all figured out. They wanted to read their journal entries to the class. They wanted to exchange entries with each other. They wanted to mix and match entries to enact a dialogue between different paintings. Indeed, they wanted to design a sequence of writing assignments to learn more about their postcards. And so together we began brainstorming, drafting, and revising a sequence of assignments to organize their responses to and their research about the painting on their postcard. The postcard became their icon and the sequence their “search engine,” enabling them to explore the web of information inside and outside their little window on the worlds of art and culture.

This is What Kathy Did

One of my students, Kathy Conrow, selected a postcard of Winslow Homer’s *The Blue Boy* (1873) [see cover] and began converting her free write into several creative responses to the painting:

2. Narrate: Use some of the information you discovered in your free write to compose a coherent narrative about your character. Tell us your story.

Phinny and I have been brothers all our lives. He’s two years older than I am, but he still lets me go just about everywhere with him.

Some mornings he goes out to the field where the cows graze and just sits there for hours, watching and thinking. I'm not sure what he thinks about or why he has to sit in the field to do it, but I go with him and wait. One day while we were sitting in the sun, stripping pieces of grass, and studying the cows, Phinny told me a story about the ship anchored down in the harbor.

3. Observe: Describe the person (or persons) who are looking at you as you hang on the wall. What are they looking at? What are they thinking about as they look at you? How have these observers changed over the years? How does it feel to be *unobserved*?

I hate Mondays. The museum is always closed. The lights are dimmed, the doors are locked and there's a heavy silence in the halls. No slamming doors, no footsteps, no hushed voices arguing about the meaning of art or whether it's time for lunch. It's just us, hanging in the darkness. Some don't mind this time alone, a break from pointing fingers and quizzical stares. But I miss the people. I like to eavesdrop when they talk about what they think we see at the bottom of the hill. I like to watch them squint as they move closer to look at my feet or the birds in the sky.

4. Respond: Write a monologue about your creation. Who painted you? How did you decide on how you would pose? How long, and how often did you have to pose? What did the painter's face look like as he studied you from behind the canvas? When were you allowed to see yourself? What do you think about your portrait?

I was surprised when I saw Mr. Homer trudging up the hill with his wooden case and thick tablet. I'd seen him by the boatyards earlier in the week when he sketched Billy and his friend as they stared at the boats. But why did he want to make a picture in the middle of a field? There were no tall ships or old docks. Just Phinny, me, and the cows. Mr. Homer said he'd like to paint us anyway, if we didn't mind, and started unpacking his brushes and examining his pencils. Once he arranged his materials, he arranged us. He wanted one of us to sit and the other to stand. We started to argue about who would sit, but when Mr. Homer said he would paint the face of the standing boy, I let Phinny have a seat. The sun was hot on the back of my neck, but there was a slight breeze from the harbor below.

Mr. Homer worked fairly fast, sketching first with his pencil, then dipping his brush into a puddle of colored water, and dashing it on to the paper. He was so involved in his work, he barely noticed when I looked at him over my shoulder. Occasionally he would lean back to study the painting, then he would scowl at some little section of the paper, and reach out to add one or two quick dashes.

Things were going fine until my hat blew off. Phinny's stayed on all right, but mine kept blowing off. Every time I had to retrieve

it, Mr. Homer had to stop painting. About the third time, Mr. Homer said he'd go get it and I should just stay. So he grabbed it and put it back on my head, twisting it around like he was trying to screw it on. But even that didn't work. The wind slipped under the brim and flipped it behind me. Finally Mr. Homer stopped another boy who was walking through the field and asked him to stand a couple of feet behind me to capture my hat if it blew off. This worked for a while. But when Mr. Homer applied one or two dashes near the top of his drawing, he took my hat, wrapped it in his jacket, and laid it beside his case until he was through for the day.

5. Collaborate: Compose a dialogue with a person in a painting that hangs next to you or on the opposite wall. What do the two of you have to say to each other after all these years? Do you admire, annoy, or avoid one another? What do the people who come and go have to say about the two of you?

The other day when things were slow, and the only people in the room were the ones in grey jackets, I decided to see how the shad-fishermen were doing. They hung right below me and I liked talking to them since I am from Gloucester, Massachusetts, and they are from Gloucester, New Jersey. They remind me of the fishermen I see in the boatyards down by the harbor.

The man kneeling at the water's edge is the one I talk to most.

"How are things down there in the fishing business today?"

"About the same. Weather looks good again, but we're still having trouble with this one net." They were always having trouble with that one net.

"Do you think you're going to get out today?"

"We keep hoping, but it's starting to look doubtful." It had been years since they had been out on the river, and I am surprised that they haven't given up by now. But somehow, each morning, they manage to start with renewed enthusiasm.

"I wish I could leave this field and help you. I've watched the fishermen down in the harbor for years. I might be able to fix that net."

[Thomas Eakins, *Shad Fishing at Gloucester-on-the-Delaware*, 1881]

(Figure 2-1)

The first five assignments invite students to play with the worlds inside their postcard and with the worlds outside, where they circulate. Their storytelling does not have to be accurate because its purpose is to encourage their identification with their painting, to help them imagine the conditions that attended its creation and have accompanied its exhibition. But inevitably, students start to investigate the clues on the back of their postcard. They want to know something about the painter, when he painted this particular painting, who the people were who posed for him, what was significant about the place

Figure 2-1

Thomas Eakins, *Shad Fishing at Gloucester-on-the-Delaware* (1881) [see p. iv for credit line]



they posed, why he selected a particular painting technique, and how this painting figures in his life and the history of painting.

Kathy's creative speculations about Homer's *The Blue Boy* prompted her to read several biographies. She discovered that 1873 was a turning point in Homer's career as he spent the summer in Gloucester, Massachusetts, painting watercolors of the local children. She used some of this information to enrich her creative writing, but the more she read, the more she wanted to conduct a formal investigation of the painting.

To conduct such an investigation, however, Kathy had to measure her imaginative speculations against the evidence of scholarship. She also had to modulate the subjective tone of her creative voice to the more objective tone of the critical voice. And finally, as she practiced with this new voice, she had to amplify and verify it by quoting, paraphrasing, and documenting the authoritative voices she discovered in her research.

6. Investigate: Read some biographies about the artist who painted you. Who are you? What is your relationship to the artist? When did he paint you? What events prompted him to paint you? What special techniques did he use to capture your image? How do you compare to other portraits he painted?

Scattered flecks of gauche grasses and field flowers, the clean white-paper shirts of meditative children, the lifted-out lights of early summer skies—these are some of the details of sun-drenched days in Gloucester, Massachusetts, that Winslow Homer captured in his first finished watercolor paintings. Before his visit to the old fishing town, Homer's watercolors might be "described as colored wash drawings" (Cooper, 20). But his experiments in the summer of 1873 enabled him to use the medium in a new and innovative way, establishing him, eventually, as "its greatest master in the history of American art" (Cikovsky, 53).

Homer's decision to delve into this transparent medium remains mysterious. His mother was an accomplished watercolorist (Cikovsky, 54), so he was aware of the medium, but he was almost thirty-eight years old before he decided to work with it himself. Nicolai Cikovsky suggests that Homer may have been influenced by the international watercolor exhibition held in New York earlier in the year (54). The exhibition demonstrated that watercolor could be used to create more than simple sketches and delicate decorations; and Homer "surely perceived that watercolors, which could be made more quickly and in greater abundance than oil paintings, and sold more cheaply, could be a more reliable source of income" (54).

The characteristics of watercolor pigments and the qualities of his subject matter also played a part in Homer's decision. Every paint medium has unique properties that cause it to behave in certain ways and allow it to be manipulated to achieve different effects. Watercolor, with its translucent qualities and capacities for capturing brilliant light, made it perfectly suited for the bright airiness of the Gloucester summer shore. The changing moments of shadow and reflection could be captured in broad washes, lifted-out lights and sparkling white paper; and the warm, glowing colors of sun-lit sand, fields, water, and sky could be achieved with fast drying layers of transparent wash (Wilmerding, 90).

The portability of watercolor also made it ideal for Homer's subject and setting. There was no cumbersome easel, bulky canvas, or cans of turpentine to haul around. As he combed the beaches of Gloucester for subjects or climbed the grassy slope where he made *The Blue Boy*, he needed only pigment, paper, brush and water, all of which could be carried with little trouble from one summer scene to the next. Helen A. Cooper suggests such portability "established what would be . . . Homer's lifelong pattern in watercolor: concentrating on a particular time on a single theme suggested by a particular locale" (24–25).

7. Analyze: Read some art criticism about yourself. What are some of the distinctive features of your image that art lovers have admired over the years? What are the particular features of your portrait that have created the most debate among critics?

Kathy elected to skip assignment 7 because she dealt with much of this information in her treatment of assignment 6. When she studied 8, she considered several topics: "Homer and His Contemporaries," "American Landscape Painting," and "The Watercolor Movement." She also considered looking at the problem of influence: the fresh air school, Japanese painting, and the emerging school of impressionism have all been cited as possible influences on the development of Homer's style. But most art historians characterize Homer as a solitary traveler, discovering his own way without the aid of instruction or influence. What finally interested Kathy about her postcard was its title, *The Blue Boy*. She remembered another painting with the same title painted by a different painter in a different style. The possibilities for a provocative comparison seemed promising.

8. Evaluate: Read some history about other artists who painted during the time you were painted *or* who painted figures like you in other times. How do art historians compare you to your contemporaries? How do they compare you to similar figures painted in other times?

The Blue Boy is a barefoot child wearing a straw hat. He is also a wealthy young man in blue satin holding a plumed hat. He is standing on a hill against a pale blue sky and on another hill with brown clouds at his back. He is ordinary and aristocratic; paired and alone; in profile and staring defiantly at the viewer.

How can these contrasting descriptions characterize one painting? The reason is simple—there are two paintings entitled *The Blue Boy*, two separate images created in different times by different artists: Winslow Homer's light-filled watercolor of a boy in a straw hat (1873), and Thomas Gainsborough's darker portrait of an elegantly dressed young man (1770).

These "Blue Boy" paintings have few similarities beyond their shared name. A handful of elemental details, such as a diagonally moving landscape, shoots of yellow grass scattered on the hill, and the vague suggestion of trees in the distance, can be seen in both, but the duplication of these points is most likely coincidental. The artists' reasons for including them in their works, however, may have been the same. The diagonal, for example, is a strong element in any composition. It adds drama and carries the eye across the landscape (Cormack, 100). The shoots of grass add detail and definition, and the vague tree forms build distance, perspective, and a deeper sense of space.

But the artists executed these details in completely different settings and media. Homer worked outdoors, painting the ordinary children in a Massachusetts fishing town—elements well-suited to the portability and spontaneous nature of the liquid medium (Cooper, 24). Indeed, he was experimenting with water-

color just as it had begun “to attract the serious and widespread interest of professional American artists, their critics and their patrons” (Cikovsky, 54).

Gainsborough, on the other hand, worked in a studio, painting lavish portraits of aristocrats from the grand houses of Bath, England (Waterhouse, 19–22). These people expected to be depicted in all their glory, their “virtue in this world . . . rewarded by [the trappings of] social and financial success” (Berger, 103). Gainsborough was working in the established tradition of his time when oil was considered the only medium appropriate for aristocratic subjects.

Such details call attention to the difference between the identity of the two Blue Boys. Homer’s boy was just one of the many vague-featured children he painted in profile during his summer in Gloucester (Wilmerding, 92). But Gainsborough’s young man identifies himself by staring directly at the viewer, allowing himself to be named. He was Jonathan Buttall, son of a wealthy Soho ironmonger and a close friend of the artist. But according to art historian Malcolm Cormack, “X-rays have revealed that the portrait was painted on a discarded canvas, so that it may well have been done for pleasure instead of on commission” (100). Nevertheless, Gainsborough placed his friend in a grand landscape and posed him, hand on hip, attired in a vibrant blue suit, holding a large feathered hat.

These comparisons suggest other differences between the two paintings. Homer’s anonymous boy looks away from the viewer, but he seems accessible. The light of the sky, the warmth of the field, the company of a friend, as well as paired cows and birds, and the causal summer clothing welcome the viewer into his familiar, comfortable world. Gainsborough’s boy (Jonathan Buttall) stares boldly at the viewer, but he seems remote. The brown sky, the desolate hill, and his fancy costume warn the viewer that his world is formidable and exclusive.

Kathy invested so much time writing about her postcard that she began to see it as *hers*. When she studied assignment 9, she decided to explore the problem of ownership. She purchased a museum catalogue and began sorting out the details listed under *provenance*—the museum’s method for recording the history of who has owned a work of art. Next, she requested permission to study in the museum’s archives and to obtain the file on *The Blue Boy*. She spent several days reading old letters, bills of sale, and catalogue descriptions. She finally visited Elisabeth Ball’s home—now an environmental center called Oakhurst Gardens—to find the bedroom where *The Blue Boy* hung for over forty years until it was moved to the museum. Her research enabled her to trace the curatorial history of the painting and speculate about her curious attachment to her postcard.

9. Document: Trace your curatorial history. Who has owned you? Why did they buy you? Where did they hang you? Why did they sell you? What is the highest price anybody has paid for you? Who paid it—a private collector? a museum? Where can we find you now? What kind of company do you keep? What other paintings hang in your room? Where did they come from?

Since *The Blue Boy* was created in 1873 many people have called it “my painting.” On that day in June, the boys on the hill may have been the first to call it theirs—seeing the finished piece, recognizing themselves in the washes, sensing that they would always be part of the painting and its history. Of course, their claims had nothing to do with actual possession. That claim was Winslow Homer’s. He composed the scene, created the painting, and claimed it as “my painting” when he signed his name in blue in the lower left corner.

It was also his hand, however, that left the inscription “to M.F.” next to his name, indicating that he wished to share his painting with another. Whether this mark was intended as a dedication or to indicate a future gift is unclear, but if we assume M.F. was Mattie French Homer, Winslow’s sister-in-law, then the inscription would eventually come to mean both.

In 1910, when Winslow Homer died, Mattie and her husband, Charles Savage Homer, Jr., were the next to call *The Blue Boy* “my painting.” Winslow lived near Charles and Mattie, especially during their summers at Prout’s Neck in Maine, and he had a special admiration for his sister-in-law. He would take her bouquets each day from the garden he kept by his studio, and he would write to her, and his brother, regularly when they were away (Graham, 30).

Mattie developed a great appreciation for Homer’s work and tried to keep others interested in it after Homer, and then her husband, died. She opened his studio to visitors and took flowers there often, possibly repaying his gifts to her (Graham, 31). According to her niece, Louise Homer Graham, Mattie also kept Winslow’s works in her home in West Townsend, Massachusetts, and the family place at Prout’s Neck. *The Blue Boy* was most likely one of these paintings, and as Mattie passed it each day she could say that’s “my painting.” It became hers officially in 1910, but if the dedication “M.F.” was meant for her, then she had always possessed part of it.

When Mattie died in 1937, another member of the Homer family was able to call *The Blue Boy* “my painting.” Mrs. Arthur P. Homer (Anna), Winslow’s niece-in-law, lived next door to Mattie when she was in West Townsend. It’s likely that Anna occasionally saw the impressive collection that covered Mattie’s walls, and she may have commented on *The Blue Boy* at some point. But whether or not she had a previous affection for the painting, it became hers in 1937, and she was able to call it “my painting” for about four years.

In February 1941 it was passed on again and, for the first time, to someone outside the Homer family. It went to William Macbeth,

Inc., an art dealer in New York City. In the hands of a dealer, “my painting” took on a new meaning. Although the painting was still appreciated for its artistic elements, it was appreciated even more for its economic possibilities. These concerns are expressed in letters from Robert McIntyre, a representative of William Macbeth, Inc., to Elisabeth Ball (the future owner of *The Blue Boy*) and her mother, Mrs. Frances Ball. In one of these letters, McIntyre wrote, “In all cases of art objects the thing to consider is estate taxes” (3 June 1955). And in another, he explains his personal feelings about the collection of “expensive pictures” saying, “In my own case, I do know that even if I could afford to own expensive pictures, I should be afraid to die possessed of them. What the ‘wolves’ would do to my widow would be just too horrible to think about!” (10 May 1955).

These letters follow McIntyre’s advice to Miss Ball to sell a few of her more expensive paintings, a sale he would have been glad to arrange. His job was to *move* paintings—to relieve some people of art and to help others acquire it. To the employees of William Macbeth, Inc., “my painting,” in connection with *The Blue Boy*, meant “mine briefly, mine to move, mine to sell.” And sell it they did, just over a year after they received it.

On May 8, 1942, Elisabeth Ball found *The Blue Boy* in their gallery in New York. She had been looking for another Homer watercolor ever since she had read about the famous painter in Lois Homer Graham’s article, “An Intimate Glimpse of Winslow Homer’s Art,” in the May 1936 issue of *Vassar Journal of Undergraduate Studies*. She had purchased her first Homer, *Rendezvous*, in 1936 on a New York “shopping” excursion (Fraser, 95). On another of these excursions, she found *The Blue Boy*, purchased it for \$1,500, marked down from its original price of \$1,800, and took it back to Oakhurst, her lifelong home in Muncie, Indiana, where it became “my painting.”

According to a list made in her own hand, Elisabeth Ball hung *The Blue Boy* in “My Bedroom,” along with a T. C. Steele oil painting of peonies, a pair of pastel portraits by T. W. Dewing, and at least two other watercolors—one entitled *Shepherd and Sheep* signed A. Mauve, and the other of an Indian village with palm trees by L. C. Maurice Gordon. At one point, it was also joined by another Winslow Homer watercolor called *The Ranger, Adirondacks*, which was painted in 1892 and acquired by Elisabeth not long after she purchased *The Blue Boy*.

In 1955, when Robert McIntyre encouraged Elizabeth to sell some of her “more expensive pictures,” he mentioned Homer’s *The Blue Boy*, as well as Thomas Eakins’ *Shad Fishing at Gloucester on the Delaware*, saying he thought they would “fare very well at this time” (10 May 1955). Fortunately, Elisabeth was not persuaded by this advice and kept the paintings until her death in April 1982. At that time the paintings were passed, along with many other pieces of her collection, to the George and Frances Ball Foundation, Muncie, Indiana. In January 1984, they were exhibited in the Elisabeth Ball

Collection of the Ball State University Museum of Art and were finally given to the museum in 1996.

The Blue Boy still hangs on the second floor of the museum. Beneath it hangs Eakins' work mentioned in McIntyre's letter. Every day many people stroll up to the painting, stop and look. Like Mattie and Elisabeth, many of these people like to think of it as "my painting."

I've become one of those people. Digging into its history, its artist, and its owners, I feel like I've developed my own special claim on *The Blue Boy*. Like the boys on the hill, mine has nothing to do with real possession. But whenever I see that watercolor—on the wall of the museum, on the page of a book, or the face of a postcard, I say that's "my painting."

When Kathy finished her curatorial history, she had one more writing assignment to consider. She also had to consider the significance of the Winslow Homer Exhibition (1996) that had recently opened at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., *without The Blue Boy*. She confessed she was ambivalent: "I feel rejected. If people studied the cultural history of the time, or had any aesthetic sensibilities, they would appreciate the special qualities of *The Blue Boy*. On the other hand, I feel relieved. *The Blue Boy* won't be traveling from museum to museum—like a homeless painting. It belongs on the second floor of the art museum. Instead of writing assignment 10, I think I'll go see "my painting."

10. Argue: Working from the information you have gathered about yourself, construct one of the following arguments:

- a. You are the best portrait your artist ever painted.
- b. You are the most representative/innovative portrait painted in your time.
- c. You cannot be appreciated unless someone studies the cultural history of your time.
- d. You can be fully appreciated by anyone in any time because of your timeless beauty.

This Is the Way It Is Now

I follow my writing students up the grand staircase, through the massive arch, and into the main gallery of the art museum. I study the colored map as they explain the sequence of presentations they plan to give in the rooms beyond the velvet ropes. And then we stroll down the halls, as a class, for a true adventure in seeing.

We stop in a gallery to hear a student read a creative response or a critical analysis of his or her painting. Often these readings create

new conversations among the reader and the students whose paintings hang on other walls in the gallery or in other galleries in the museum. Sometimes these conversations focus on the differences between rooms, frames, and plaques. Sometimes they focus on differences of subject and technique. And sometimes they focus on the unexpected connections between paintings, painters, or moments in cultural history.

I am no longer the teacher. My students have become sophisticated consumers, explaining to me and each other the significance of “their painting.” And although they develop a strong attachment to their postcard, they are interested in the others. So eventually, all of us are back in the gift shop. Like Robert McIntyre, we can’t “afford to own expensive pictures,” but we can afford to collect postcards and to study the many worlds—inside and out—they enable us to see.

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