A new exhibition at the Worcester Art Museum looks at how an extended visit to England influenced one of America’s most enduringly popular artists. “Coming Away: Winslow Homer and England” gives viewers a chance to see favorite works by Homer alongside those by English artists who had an effect on him, from how he handled creative ideas to his way of looking at the natural world.

From March 1881 to November 1882, Homer took up residence in Cullercoats, a small fishing village on the northeast coast of England. It was a relatively short period that nevertheless had a lifelong influence. The show comprises about 70 works including many from the 1860s and 1870s, before he makes his journey. “It’s a smaller introduction to Homer and how he was understood and what type of work he was creating before he left for England,” said Elizabeth Athens, WAM’s assistant curator of American Art.

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Paintings in “Coming Away: Winslow Homer and England” are put into place at Worcester Art Museum.

England’s influence on Winslow Homer
Worcester, Milwaukee art museums collaborate on exhibition

BY NANCY SHEEHAN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICK CINCLAIR
The show was developed around two of Homer’s most well-known paintings, WAM’s “The Gale” (1883–93) and the Milwaukee Art Museum’s “Hark! The Lark” (1882). Originally envisioned by Athens as a small in-house show celebrating the centenary of WAM’s acquisition of “The Gale,” the concept expanded as her research unfolded. Her plan to request just a few carefully selected loans led her to call the Milwaukee museum because it had a major oil that came from Homer’s English period. Milwaukee’s American art curator, Brandon Ruud, suggested the two museums collaborate toward a bigger exhibition.

“It sounded like a great plan and I thought it would be really wonderful to work with him and Milwaukee on the project,” Athens said. “And I was especially excited because I am originally from Wisconsin, so it was a nice tieback to my homeland.”

While the show, for context, has works from before Homer left his homeland, the Worcester and Milwaukee co-curators wanted to focus on his English period and how it continued to influence his career in the decades that followed. Exhibition-goers will be able to see Homer’s work next to those of some of the English artists who had an important impact on him, including J.M.W. Turner and Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

So why did Homer go to England? After all, he was quite well established in the American art world by 1881, as he prepared to set sail.

That is not an easy question to answer, according to Athens. “Scholars often refer to him as ‘withholding’ because he never really clearly articulates anything that he does,” she said. Because of that reticence, his artwork is, in some ways, the biggest clue we have and the clearest indicator of why he did the things he did.

The first major work for which Homer achieved acclaim here at home was “Prisoners from the Front,” an 1866 oil painting that represents an actual scene from the Civil War in which a Union officer stands overseeing several captured Confederate officers. By the late 1870s, Homer had been a fixture in the American art world for several years but remained stubbornly identified with that early success.

“It seems like all the paintings he did after that — they were well received — but they were always measured against ‘Prisoners from the Front,’” Athens said. “So, he’s in this weird position where he’s no longer a new artist but it was as though he had also not reached the potential that he could reach.”

Going to England may have been an attempt to find a new atmosphere, but he also would have been familiar with the artwork of Turner, although mainly through prints and the writings of art critics. “Homer probably had not seen many works by Turner, yet he was such a hugely important figure in 19th-century art so going to England to see his work could be part of the reason,” Athens said.

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Coming Away: Winslow Homer and England

Where: Worcester Art Museum, 55 Salisbury St, Worcester

When: Runs through Feb. 4; open Wednesday-Sunday, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. and the third Thursday of every month 10 a.m. - 8 p.m.

How much: Members free; non-members, $16; $14, seniors 65 and older and college students with ID; $6, ages 4-17; free ages 3 and younger. For other discounts, see website.

Related symposium, Dec. 8-9: At 6 p.m. Dec. 8, Dr. Sarah Burns and Ruth N. Halls, Professor Emerita of Art History at Indiana University, Bloomington, will present the keynote lecture examining Winslow Homer's time in England. A day of talks by noted scholars of American and British art will follow from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Dec. 9. The keynote and symposium, held at the museum, are free and open to the public. Registration is required and can be made by calling (508) 793-4317. The symposium is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

For more: Visit www.worcesterart.org

Winslow Homer’s “The Cotton Pickers.”

Assistant curator Betsy Athens, who put together the Winslow Homer exhibit, says the artist’s work “always retains this kind of freshness.”

Betsy Athens, left, assistant curator of American Art, and paper conservator Eliza Spaulding examine details on a rarely-displayed 1883 watercolor by Winslow Homer at the Worcester Art Museum.
Also, Homer’s 1877 painting, “The Cotton Pickers,” sold immediately when he first exhibited it. An English cotton merchant whose name is not known bought it. “There are a lot of English cotton merchants in the 19th century so, unfortunately, we don’t know who it is,” Athens said. This purchaser, however, submitted it to the Royal Academy of Arts exhibition in England in 1878 and it was well received in the British art press, which may have opened up a new professional possibility for Homer. “He was like ‘Oh, maybe I could become part of this English art scene,’” Athens said.

There already had been American artists who had relocated to England around that time, including George Boughton, who was born there but raised in America. He had moved to London and was doing very well there, a fact that may not have been lost on Homer.

“I think a change of context, a change of scenery and the chance to see in person the works of Turner would have been hugely valuable for him,” Athens said. “So, we make a number of surmises but, as I say, he was pretty withholding so there’s no way to say with certainty why he went, but those are all things that likely influenced his decision.”

While Homer’s reasons for going are hard to know, the effects of his ex-pat artistic interlude are easier to see. After his time in England, the natural world takes on a greater significance in his paintings whereas before, in the 1860s and 1870s, it’s more of a setting or backdrop. “In the 1880s and afterward, nature really becomes such an important focus itself as a character, as a sort of active force, and I really see that coming out of his English period,” she said.

His England stay had other impacts on Homer, from his brushstrokes to the way he worked out creative challenges, and it has ample rich scholarly fodder. But the show transcends the academic interests of researchers and art historians. “You can see how he’s putting elements together in different ways and really experimenting,” Athens said. “It kind of illuminates the process of creating art, that it’s not just that an artist has an idea and then he paints it out and there it is, but there’s really a process of discovery and a kind of working through of things.”

A process of discovery also continually engaged Athens as she researched Homer and worked through the countless details required to pull this landmark exhibition together.

“It’s not uncommon, if you’re working on an artist or a project for a long time, to by the end be, like, ‘Oh boy. I’m ready to be done with this person,’” she said. “But I’ve not experienced that with Homer at all because he just kept changing. He was responsive to developments in the art world and to art criticism so his work always retains this kind of freshness. I found him to be a really fascinating artist to work on because he’s so inventive and continually exploring, from the beginning of his career to the end.”

Detail of a rarely-displayed 1883 watercolor titled “Crab Fishing” by Winslow Homer at the Worcester Art Museum.