

Details

Battle Hymn of Winslow Homer

By Paul Richard

Though they follow different melodies,

Winslow Homer's painting, *Home Sweet Home* (1863), and Julia Ward Howe's poem, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (1861), deserve to be together in historical remembrance. His brushed figures and her onward-marching verses are imbued with the Union's cause and top tunes of its songsters, as well as prayerful Christianity, militance and mud. The home Homer depicts in the first canvas he ever showed in public is anything but sweet. An army camp beside a river: Not long ago it rained. We see a pair of Union infantrymen, their heavy mud-caked shoes, their army blankets drying, their privacies of reverie, the roughness of their ration, their pup tents and their kit. More subtly, Homer delivers a sermon akin to Howe's battle hymn. To the tune of "John Brown's Body," Howe testifies: "I have seen him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps...I can read his righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps." Homer sees him too. In an assemblage of details, too coherent and too numerous to be there accidentally, he gathers allusions to the Passion that amount to a reassuring blessing: Jesus is here.



1

Tent Tomb
Light does not get through the canvas to alleviate the shadow, and in the shadow lie notions of many soldiers buried. We see one's sole.

2

Sacred Meal
Hardtack normally eaten off dented pewter graces what looks like burnished silver as if it were consecrated bread of the Eucharist.

3

Battlefield Anthem
A regimental band strikes up "Home Sweet Home," an 1823 song by John Howard Payne and Henry Bishop that was a favorite of Union troops.

4

Prickly Plant
A patch of holly, with its skin-puncturing spines and blood-red berries, is a reminder of the Crown of Thorns worn by Jesus.

5

Stick Crosses
Hatched staffs of new-cut wood evoke Golgotha, the site where Jesus died. Two hold up the blanket and a third supports the pup tent and a soldier's bag.