



Smithsonian American Art Museum

January 2012



Bear Hunting, Prospect Rock

1892

Winslow Homer

Born: Boston, MA 1836

Died: Prout's Neck, ME 1910

Watercolor and pencil on paper

Sheet: 13 7/8 x 20 in.

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Gift of John Gellatly

1929.6.66

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

Researcher Ann's work on this watercolor began with looking at it in reproduction because it was not on view in the museum. Since art works on paper, like this watercolor, fade easily in the light, their time in galleries must be limited. She made an appointment to have the watercolor brought out of storage. Her observations, Winslow Homer's title for the work, and the inscriptions written on the watercolor suggested questions:

- **Where is Prospect Rock and what do we see in this picture?**
- **Who is Robert, to whom Homer dedicated the watercolor (inscribed at the upper right in ink: To Robert-from his Friend Winslow Homer- July 1905), and who are the men in the picture?**
- **How does this watercolor relate to the history of environmental protection in the Adirondacks?**

I began by finding books and articles about Winslow Homer's art. I concentrated on Homer's art works showing the Adirondacks, which is a beautiful wilderness area in New York State, where this painting is set. I also looked up sources on the history of the Adirondacks. In a book about Homer's work in the Adirondacks I learned that Homer was an enthusiastic fisherman and

hunter. He belonged to a hunting and fishing club called the North Woods Club (Tatham, 1996). Several years ago I was lucky enough to be able to visit the North Woods Club and to see the game book Homer signed – it is great when a researcher can call upon personal experience.

The curatorial file on *Bear Hunting* includes a copy of a letter from Homer, dated July 24, 1905, in which he dedicates the watercolor to Robert Bibby. This letter, a great primary source, gives the last name of Robert, to whom Homer inscribed the painting. But who was Robert Bibby?

The book *Winslow Homer in the Adirondacks* solved this quickly, revealing that Robert Bibby was the husband of a woman whose family once owned the farm that became the North Woods Club. The family sold the farm to the club and Bibby worked as the club's superintendent for two years until 1889, then returned in 1895. Homer and Bibby would have met often at the North Woods Club and they evidently became friends (Tatham, 1996).

Homer's 1905 letter to Bibby says, "If Rufus ever comes along your way-you must read to him this title to the picture, 'Rufus Wallace Having Secured the Services of Mike Flynn as Guide has arrived on Prospect Rock, Essex Co., N.Y.'" At the North Woods Club, visiting hunters and fishermen hired local men to work as guides to help them to hunt and fish successfully. Homer's paintings and watercolors of the North Woods Club almost always show only professional guides—not gentleman hunters and fishermen. Rufus Wallace, the older man in the *Bear Hunting* watercolor, was a guide and Michael Flynn, the younger man, was also a professional guide but a less experienced one—scarcely a person who would guide Wallace! So Homer in his letter is joking about Wallace, in his old clothes, being a wealthy hunter being guided by the younger Flynn (Tatham, 1990). Both Wallace and Flynn appear as hunters in many of [Homer's paintings](#).

I wanted to know more about the gun Rufus Wallace, the old bearded guide, is shown holding. Homer, an experienced hunter, would be able to get the details of a gun right. I checked out books about rifles to find out what guns of the period were used for hunting (as Walter, 2006). When I had "done my homework" on rifles so I knew what questions to ask, and could understand the answers, I contacted the [National Firearms Museum](#) in Fairfax, Virginia. A fellow researcher had told me about the museum. Their senior curator was on vacation, but he answered my question by e-mail right away. The old man in the watercolor is holding a Winchester Model 1873 rifle, popularly known as "the gun that won the West." I checked out a book about Winchester Rifles that would give me more details (Madis, 1961). I confirmed from a more general book on rifles that Winchester 1873s were very versatile rifles owned and used by many hunters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Walter, 2006).

Prospect Rock, seen in the foreground of *Bear Hunting*, is a high rocky point near the southern border of the land in the North Woods Club, as I learned from a map in the book on Homer in the Adirondacks (Tatham, 1996). I could figure out the direction of the view in the watercolor because Homer shows Mud Pond, which is just south of Prospect Rock, on the right in the

foreground. *Bear Hunting* therefore shows a view to the southeast of Prospect Rock, looking off the edge of the North Woods Club property. The map in Tatham's book told me that the tree-covered ridges Homer showed in the background of the painting were called the Blue Ledges. Rather than hunting through nineteenth-century maps of the Adirondacks to determine who owned that land in 1892, I consulted the web site of the [Adirondack Museum](#) in Blue Mountain Lake, New York. I thought that the library at the Adirondack Museum would have lots of historic maps of the Adirondacks. I e-mailed their librarian with my question and he quickly replied that the land south of Prospect Rock was mostly a wild area owned by New York State. This is important, as I learned from books about the history of the Adirondacks, because in 1885 the state had created the Forest Preserve of the Adirondacks and the Catskills (both wilderness mountain ranges in northern New York State; Schneider, 1997). This protected an enormous area that was to remain wild and open to hunting and fishing rather than being damaged by the mining and logging that had long gone on there.

In 1892, New York State passed another law creating the Adirondack Park, giving the area even stronger legal protection. These laws were early instances of legal environmental protection (Schneider, 1997). We don't know how Homer felt about the laws, but he certainly benefitted from them since he continued to hunt and fish and paint at the North Woods Club. Homer made *Bear Hunting* in 1892, a time, as I learned from online databases, when many articles about the new law appeared in New York City (where Homer's main studio was) newspapers such as the *New York Times* (which I am able to search through an online database). I wondered when during the year the law was passed. Could Homer have known about it when he painted *Bear Hunting*?

Homer was in the Adirondacks from June to July and September to October 1892, as we know from his signature in the visitor books of the North Woods Club (Tatham, 1996). To find out when the Adirondack Park law was passed, I looked through the [Adirondack Park Agency](#) website and databases of historic newspapers. But while I found a lot of discussion of the law, I did not find the exact day it was passed. So I added that question to my e-mail to the Adirondack Museum librarian. He told me that the law creating Adirondack Park was signed by the governor of New York on May 20, 1892. Therefore Homer's visits to the North Woods Club that year, when he would have painted *Bear Hunting*, were after that law was passed. By making a painting that shows state-owned, protected, land in Adirondack Park, Homer could have been celebrating the preservation of the wild Adirondack lands he knew and loved so well.

Did Homer ever kill a bear? He had a stroke in May 1908, but recovered enough to return to the North Woods Club that June. He went out with a group of hunters who were attacked by a bear that refused to back off. Homer quickly grabbed a guide's rifle and shot the bear before it could hurt anyone. In the North Woods Club's register where all fish and game killed were listed, Homer proudly wrote: "1Bear!" (Tatham, 1996)

Now I know enough to ask some further questions:

- In his art, how did Homer use, and change, the characters of people he knew who posed for him?
- Could we fairly consider Homer's art as advocating the protection of the environment?

Selected Bibliography:

Adirondack Museum web site. <http://www.adkmuseum.org/>

Adirondack Park Agency web site. <http://apa.ny.gov/index.html>

Curatorial Files, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Madis, George. *The Winchester Book*. Dallas Texas: Published by the author, 1961.

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, web site. <http://www.mfa.org/collections/>

National Firearms Museum website. <http://www.nramuseum.com/>

Schneider, Paul. *The Adirondacks: A History of America's First Wilderness*. New York: A John Macrae Book, Henry Holt and Company, 1997.

Tatham, David. "Trapper, Hunter, and Woodsman: Winslow Homer's Adirondack Figures." *American Art Journal*, vol. 22, no 4 (Winter 1990): 40-67.

Tatham, David. *Winslow Homer in the Adirondacks*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996.

Walter, John. *The Rifle Story: An Illustrated History from 1756 to the Present Day*. London: Greenhill Books, 2006.