



Smithsonian American Art Museum

February 2012



Northern Minnesota Mine

1934

E. Dewey Albinson

Born: Minneapolis, Minnesota 1898

Died: Mexico 1971

oil on canvas

40 x 50 1/8 in. (101.6 x 127.2 cm.)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor

1964.1.49

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

E. Dewey Albinson painted Northern Minnesota Mine in 1934 as part of the federal government's Public Works of Art Project (PWAP). The PWAP artists were featured in the Smithsonian American Art Museum's very popular exhibition, [1934: A New Deal for Artists](#) which is currently touring the country. Many artists chose themes of industry and technology for their paintings. Researcher Liz decided to investigate Albinson's mining images and the Iron Range mines of Minnesota.

Minnesota, Mining, and Mobile Homes

My friend and colleague, Ann, had already researched *Northern Minnesota Mine* for 1934, so I began my investigation by reviewing her files, in which I discovered David Walker's *Iron Frontier* (1979), which summarized the history of mining in Northern Minnesota's Iron Range. Iron ore was discovered in the mid-nineteenth century around [Lake Superior](#) in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The Mesabi Range in Northern Minnesota was first discovered in 1866 but not developed until the 1890's. The Mesabi was prized for its hematite, an iron ore. The powdery red Mesabi ores were soft and easy to excavate. Mining companies first extracted the ore through underground mining using mineshafts such as this one at the Norman Mine at [Franklin \(near Virginia, Minnesota\)](#). (Walker, 1979, 86-105). Although mineshafts continued to

extract ore, open pit mining was introduced in the late nineteenth century. Huge, cavernous pits were dug hundreds of feet into the ground. The [Mahoning Mine near Hibbing, MN was not very deep in 1905](#), but by the 1920's and 1930's, [it had become the largest open-pit mine in the world](#). The [Hull-Rust Mahoning Mine](#) is still in operation and can be visited by tourists. Other mines such the [Hill-Annex Mine](#) have been converted to parks and recreation areas.

Incidentally, Hibbing is also the hometown of Robert Zimmerman, a.k.a. Bob Dylan, and I found an [elementary school photograph](#) of the young singer on the Iron Range Research Center's website.

The curatorial file contained an unpublished essay on Albinson by art historian Mary Swanson, who said that the artist painted mining subjects in the 1930's, such as *Mesabi Range*, and two other paintings, *Mesabi Mountain Mine* and *Spruce Mine*, both exhibited at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1933 (Swanson, 23).

This led me to wonder whether these paintings still exist and if Albinson painted other works on this subject?

Through searching the art auction databases, ArtPrice and AskArt, I found a list of museums owning works by Albinson. I contacted these museums and received a plethora of responses and references.



E. Dewey Albinson, *Mine Pit [northern Minnesota, Mesabi Range]*, 1932, oil on canvas, courtesy American Swedish Institute, Minneapolis, MN

The [Minnesota Historical Society](#) has an amazing [Visual Resources Database](#) online. Not only did I find [historical photographs of Albinson](#) but I also found his 1932 painting of the [Franklin Mine](#). Curt Pederson, curator at the [American Swedish Institute](#) in Minneapolis, sent me an image of another mining painting by Albinson -also dated 1932 - titled *Mine Pit [northern Minnesota, Masaba Range]*.

I also wondered if *Northern Minnesota Mine* depicts a specific mine. Peter Spooner of the Tweed Art Museum at the University of Minnesota at Duluth recommended

that I talk to Patricia Maus, Curator of the [Northeast Minnesota Historical Center](#) at the University of Minnesota at Duluth. Duluth, located on Lake Superior, was a major shipping port for ores from the Mesabi Range.

Patricia told me about the online collections of the [Iron Range Research Center](#) of the Minnesota Discovery Center in Chisholm, Minnesota, a city in the Mesabi Range [also accessible via [Minnesota Digital Library website](#)]. Patricia mentioned that [houses](#) and [gardens](#) are well-documented in historical photographs but not so much farm fields next to mines. Patricia sent me an [informative article by Dr. Arnold Alanen](#) about the “locations.” “Location” was the term

for the worker settlements situated next to the iron mines, some constructed by the mining companies. Because new pits were being opened all the time and existing pits expanded, houses and whole locations had to be [moved](#) as a result (hence my mention of “Mobile Homes”!). The constantly-changing nature of Mesabi locations and mines presented another challenge in connecting Albinson’s painting to a particular mine.

Meanwhile, I have compared Albinson’s three mining paintings with historical photographs from the Minnesota Historical Society, the Iron Range Research Center, and the Library of Congress. The trestle in the middle ground of *Northern Minnesota Mine* resembles somewhat photos of mines’ [iron ore loading facilities](#) I also found numerous photos of the [Missabe Mountain open pit mine, Franklin](#) in the MHS database from the 1930’s, photographs of the [Franklin Mine at Virginia](#) from the 1890’s, and a [View of the Norman Mine, an underground "shaft mine" located in the village of Franklin](#) (1922) but was confused whether Franklin and Virginia were the same or different places.

Since Albinson also painted Spruce Mine, I searched for and found several images from the 1920’s and 1930’s of the Oliver Mining Company’s Spruce Mine at Eveleth (Oliver was a division of the U.S.Steel Corporation): a [view of the interior of the pit \(1924\) with steam locomotives](#); [employee houses, lawns and gardens at Spruce Mine](#) (including vegetable [gardens resembling the cabbage patch](#) in the painting’s foreground) ; and an [ore loading facility next to railroad cars](#) that looks like the black structure immediately behind the smokestack in *Northern Minnesota Mine*.

I also decided to contact experts on mining history. Brian Szott at the Minnesota Historical Society referred me to Dave Dahl, a geologist at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, who told me that the Franklin Mine was last in production in 1915 or 1919, but that Spruce and [Missabe Mountain Mines](#) were active in the 1930’s.

I concluded that *Northern Minnesota Mine* may depict the Oliver Mining Company’s Spruce Mine at Eveleth, Minnesota.

However, my thinking changed when I heard back from Marvin Lammpa, a local historian specializing in Iron Range history, who Patricia Maus had suggested that I contact. He interpreted for me various details of *Northern Minnesota Mine* and drew conclusions that I might not have recognized. Here is a summary of Marvin’s observations:

- Marvin noted that the large pit in the background of *Northern Minnesota Mine* was one of the large open pits created by more than one mining effort or company. He mentioned several mines of this kind, including the [Hull-Rust Mahoning Mine](#) complex near Hibbing, Minnesota, the [Hill Annex-Hill Trumbull-Delaware complex](#) near Calumet, the [Stevenson-Russell-Benet](#) complex near Keewatin (near Hibbing) and the [Rochleau-](#)

[Shaw-Missabe Mountain mine near Virginia](#) [I have provided links to images of these mines].

- Marvin pointed out the steam locomotives in the open pit that pushed railroad cars filled with ore. He noted that this method of extraction “was used only in the largest pits and complexes and only during the years 1925-1934.” By 1925, the largest mines were using 127-ton [steam locomotives](#) called “steamers” that pushed five 75-ton cars loaded with 1,000 tons of ore! As the mines got deeper and the grades of the pit railroads increased, steamers were not so effective. Beginning in 1926, some mines started to switch to electric locomotives, which were expensive and needed electric trolley lines but required less labor to operate. The Hill-Annex Mine was the first to convert, but the Hull-Rust Mine was the last to switch to electrics and used steamers “as late as 1934.”
- Marvin was also able to identify the structures in the middle ground and foreground of the painting:
 - Albinson depicted a “stockpile trestle” at the edge of the mine and a “loading pocket trestle with a steamer and five cars full of ore ready to be dropped into a train and hauled to ore docks on Lake Superior.” Behind the trestles are “a mine engine house and a smoke stack which usually housed a steam engine to generate power for the mine” and “an old headframe, probably from an earlier underground working.” Marvin noted that open pit mines were often expansions of earlier underground or mill mines. Hull-Rust and Mahoning were among these expanded mines, and I found two photos from the 1920’s, one showing an [underground mine shaft resembling the structure in our painting](#) and the other showing perhaps the [same shaft with a smokestack](#).
 - Marvin identified the cluster of gardens and houses in the foreground as one of the “locations,” noting that these settlements disappeared in the 1930’s as roads and transportation improved and miners moved to nearby towns. It was common, he noted, for miners to maintain gardens and own livestock. I noticed that Albinson included a pigsty with pigs just to the left of the oval-shaped haystack.

Marvin also pointed out the group of miners with lunch pails standing next to tracks and overhead wires. He believes these tracks may indicate the Mesabi Electric Railway, a thirty-mile street car line connecting the mining towns of Hibbing and Gilbert. Marvin noted that “the street car offered hourly service from 6 a.m. to midnight during the years of 1912 to 1927 and contributed to the decline of mining locations.” If Marvin is correct, Albinson is therefore contrasting the past with the present, the old way of life on the locations slowly giving way to the trolleys and mining towns of modern-day life. I found a map through the Iron Range Research Center of the [Mesabi Electric Railway](#) and, compared it to a later undated [map](#) of the Mesabi Range. I saw that the trolley passed through the towns of Hibbing, Chisholm, Mountain Iron, Virginia, Eveleth, and Gilbert near several of the open pit mines. If I could discover the exact location of the tracks in relation to the open pit mines as they existed in 1934, perhaps I could answer the question, **which mine did Albinson paint?** I am ordering on microfilm the archives

of the Minnesota division of PWAP, in the hopes that I can find the paperwork with Albinson's submission of *Northern Minnesota Mine* and an identification of the mine depicted. But perhaps identifying the exact mine is not as important as understanding *Northern Minnesota Mine* and what it can tell us about the people and industry of Minnesota's Iron Range.

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