

Basic Detail Report



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Title: The Prospector

Date: ca. 1879

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3dfdd

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: Although J. G. Brown's depictions of adults are far less numerous and less known than his depictions of children, they present an important side of his career and remain some of his finest works. The Prospector probably dates to the late 1870s when Brown experimented with a wider range of subjects and produced many scenes of men at work. Before this time, he painted men almost exclusively in portraits or with women in the context of courting scenes, such as "The Music Lesson" (1870; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). The impetus for Brown's new interest in the themes of both work and men probably came from his visits in the summers of 1877 and 1878 to Grand Manan, a small island in the Bay of Fundy off the coast of New Brunswick. Artists had gone there since at least the 1850s but arrived in greater numbers in the 1870s, when the spot seems to have peaked in popularity. Published accounts and artists' renderings of Grand Manan emphasized the dramatic rocky coastline. Brown was distinctive in painting the rugged fishermen rather than the rugged landscape. He executed many studies of the men in their boats casting nets or heading home and on shore cleaning fish or carrying oars. These studies conveyed the importance of work, especially manual labor, and of communal life. Brown's choice of subject may have been influenced by Winslow Homer's earlier engravings and paintings of Adirondack fishermen and guides, such as Two Guides (1877; Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Mass.); Brown greatly admired Homer, and the two artists had studios in the same building. Homer, however, did not turn to depicting the harsh life of English fishermen until several years after Brown's Grand Manan period. "The Prospector" may represent a Grand Manan fisherman, but more likely Brown's subject was neither a fisherman nor a prospector but a lumberman he observed during a visit to Maine in the summer of 1879. The press followed his activities, reporting in August that after painting fishing subjects on Long Island, Brown had gone north to Moosehead Lake to join his pupil, Gilbert Gaul, for a tour.¹ (1) By October, Brown was back in New York: Mr. J. G. Brown spent a diligent summer this year in the backwoods of Maine. He joined a party which went off from Moosehead Lake to a lumber camp in a dense wilderness.

Basic Detail Report

The occupants of the camp are not cutting trees to any extent, but are blasting out rocks from the water courses, grinding their axes, fitting up their cabins, and getting ready for the coming campaign generally...Mr. Brown studied the ways of the lumbermen and incidents of the camp.² (2) Camp life certainly seems to be the subject of "The Prospector". Brown's emphasis on the many stones piled up to make a fireplace suggests the activities of the lumber camp and the Maine woods rather than Grand Manan. The dense closed-in composition, mountainside background, and shadows of foliage on the tent also may indicate a forest interior. Brown's Grand Manan scenes, in contrast, usually feature open sky or sea. "The Prospector" is most likely a study. Brown's finished works are almost always more tightly painted. Early in his career he adopted a realist style that changed little over the next fifty years, as he continued to emphasize precise modeling, anecdotal detail, and narrative incident. Loose brushwork and fresh vivid color, however, mark his Grand Manan studies and *The Prospector*, making them some of his most enjoyable, and spontaneous works. Brown produced very few finished Grand Manan paintings, presumably because he received no orders for them based on his studies. Critic-historian George Sheldon wrote in 1880, "Mr. Brown himself would enjoy nothing more than to carry out upon canvas the ideas and facts which they contain or suggest, but he has too much successful work under way to waste his strength upon that for which there seemed to be no demand."³ (3) Perhaps there was no demand for Maine fishermen or lumbermen either, since the few known works that can be definitely linked to Brown's Maine trip appear to be studies: a fishing motif, "Giving the Butt", dated 1879 (Springfield Museum of Fine Arts, Mass.), and a rough sketch of a campfire, "Camp in the Maine Woods", also dated 1879 (Forbes Magazine Collection, New York). Two other paintings, now lost, bear titles that suggest they related to Brown's Maine experience: "The Camp Guard" and "The Camp Cook".⁴ (4) While Brown apparently did not pursue further the theme of the virile outdoorsman, his interest in the working man culminated in one of his finest paintings, "The Longshoremen's Noon" (1879; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). This large finished scene of New York dock workers at rest has an urban setting, the realm Brown's public would come to associate with his name. In representing the monumental idealized immigrant laborers of "The Longshoremen's Noon", Brown built upon two years of studying hardy outdoor types in paintings like "The Prospector". This important group of works produced between 1877 and 1879 that focus on a male world of outdoor labor stands in marked contrast to later depictions of men. Beginning about 1880, the men Brown painted were old codgers, Yankee farmers in cluttered barn interiors, only occasionally occupied as carpenters or chair caners and usually characterized as relics of another age. Bibliography: Martha J. Hoppin, "Country Paths and City Sidewalks: The Art of J. G. Brown", exhib. cat. (Springfield, Mass.: George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum, 1989). NOTES: 1. "Summer Haunts of Artists," "Art Amateur 1" (August 1879): 50. Gaul must have remained with Brown for the Maine tour, since he exhibited a Maine

Basic Detail Report

subject the following winter. Gaul's "Camp Fire in the Maine Woods" (whereabouts unknown), shown in February 1880 at Gill's Gallery in Springfield, Massachusetts, was described by the "Springfield Daily Republican" (February 17, 1880, p. 8), as a depiction of a tall man seen against the firelight as he lights his pipe, with woods and moon as background. 2. "Studio Gossip," New York "Daily Tribune", October 6, 1879, p. 6; and "Studio Notes," "Art Interchange 3" (October 1, 1879): iii. 3. S. [George Sheldon], "Sketches and Studies VIII," "Art Journal" 6 (December 1880): 372-73; and "J. G. Brown," "Harper's Weekly" 24 (June 12, 1880): 373. 4. Both were offered at Brown's studio sale; see "Catalogue of Paintings by J. G. Brown", N.A., "to be Sold at Auction Without Reserve", sale cat., Fifth Avenue Art Galleries, New York, January 26 and 27, 1892, no. 16, "The Camp Guard" (23 x 15 in.), and no. 20, "The Camp Cook" (20 x 14 in.).
Dimensions: 23 x 15 in.