

# Winslow Homer: A Down East Story

by Jim Bashline

ONE OF AMERICA'S finest painters was Winslow Homer (1836-1910), whose powerful and poetic watercolors influenced the style of watercolorists then and now. He came to the medium after establishing himself in oils and worked there for a period of over thirty years (1873-1905), producing at least 685 watercolor paintings. According to Helen A. Cooper, author of *Winslow Homer Watercolors*, Homer created his watercolors primarily during working vacations at the New England coast, in the Adirondacks, Quebec, the Caribbean, and Florida, sites he chose for specific subjects. It may be surprising to some readers to learn that hunting and fishing scenes echo throughout the body of his work.

One of the prize items in the Museum's collection is Winslow Homer's elegant fly rod. In this article member Jim Bashline describes how he stumbled upon this artifact, which gives us the great pleasure of showcasing a fragment of Winslow Homer's sporting work.

EDITOR

WINSLOW HOMER WAS LUCKY enough to earn a living as an artist from the time he was sent to cover the Civil War as a battlefield artist for *Harper's Weekly*. When the war ended, he switched gears at the age of thirty and turned from magazine illustration to easel painting and earned for himself a lasting reputation.

Winslow Homer's seascapes of the Maine coast and his ocean scenes off the beaches of Florida and the Bahamas hang in the nation's most prestigious museums. *Gulfstream*, *Breaking Storm*, and *The Hurricane* are among his most popular efforts, but far more significant are his near-perfect hunting and fishing

watercolors. Homer painted dozens of fishing scenes drawn from his time in Maine and the mountains of New York State that show his great love of the outdoors and his understanding of that world. Winslow Homer loved to fish. I learned about his involvement in fly fishing in a rather dramatic way twenty-five years ago.

While living in Camp Hill, Pennsyl-

vania, I came to know another resident, Thomas A. Forbes, a much-traveled civil engineer who loved to fly fish and hunt with a bow. He was highly competent in both sports, especially archery, and wrote extensively on the subject. During his young adulthood he had worked in South and Central America and told fascinating stories about road building in tropical jungles. A "down East" story, however, proved to be the best of them all.

While consulting on a bridge project in Maine shortly after World War I, he was talked into doing a land survey chore for a friend of "a friend." As it turned out, the "friend" was a nephew of Winslow Homer. The nephew was a little short of cash and as payment offered Tom his choice of items that were "lying around the barn." Forbes recalled that the weathered structure contained a heap of "pure junk" (or so it seemed at the time). Only an ardent angler—as it appeared Homer was—would have acquired so much. There were many items of fishing gear: nets, rattan creels, fly books, and the like, but also an old easel, a stack of sketches, and several unfinished paintings.

As a closet watercolorist who reveres Winslow Homer above any other artist, I was thunderstruck by Tom's story. Tom allowed that he wasn't much into art appreciation, so as he looked around the barn one of the fly rods was of more interest to him because he needed one and the rod seemed quite sound. "And it was," he said, "I fished with that old pole for five or six years until I earned enough money to buy a new Leonard. I must have caught nearly a thousand little brookies with it. Then it was retired.

*The World of Winslow Homer* (Time-Life Books, 1966)



Winslow Homer proudly modeling a new English suit in 1880. (Throughout his life, the great artist always dressed nattily.) A year later, in the middle of an artistic crisis, Homer would leave America and settle for two years in a little English fishing village on the North Sea called Cullercoats.

I haven't looked at it in years."

After fumbling around in his basement for five minutes or so, Tom plucked a rod case from behind a musty stack of string-bound *National Geographic* magazines. One of the muslin cords which held the four-piece bamboo rod in its grooved pine case disintegrated as he unwound it. The butt section was removed and there, etched into the case was a most famous American signature: W. Homer, Scarboro, Maine. The trailing style of the last letter in "Homer" was unmistakable.

What happened to the balance of the Winslow Homer memorabilia that remained in the barn? Tom Forbes didn't know. He was only in Maine for one summer before he returned to Pennsylvania. Winslow Homer's nephew? Forbes had no further contact with him either and couldn't remember his name. That the rod was authentic was corroborated by Austin Hogan, the first curator of the American Museum of Fly Fishing. At my suggestion, Forbes presented the 9 1/2-foot Homer rod, made by B. F. Welch, Boston, to the Museum in 1969. I drove Tom and the rod to Manchester, Vermont, in July of that year and it has been part of the permanent collections since.

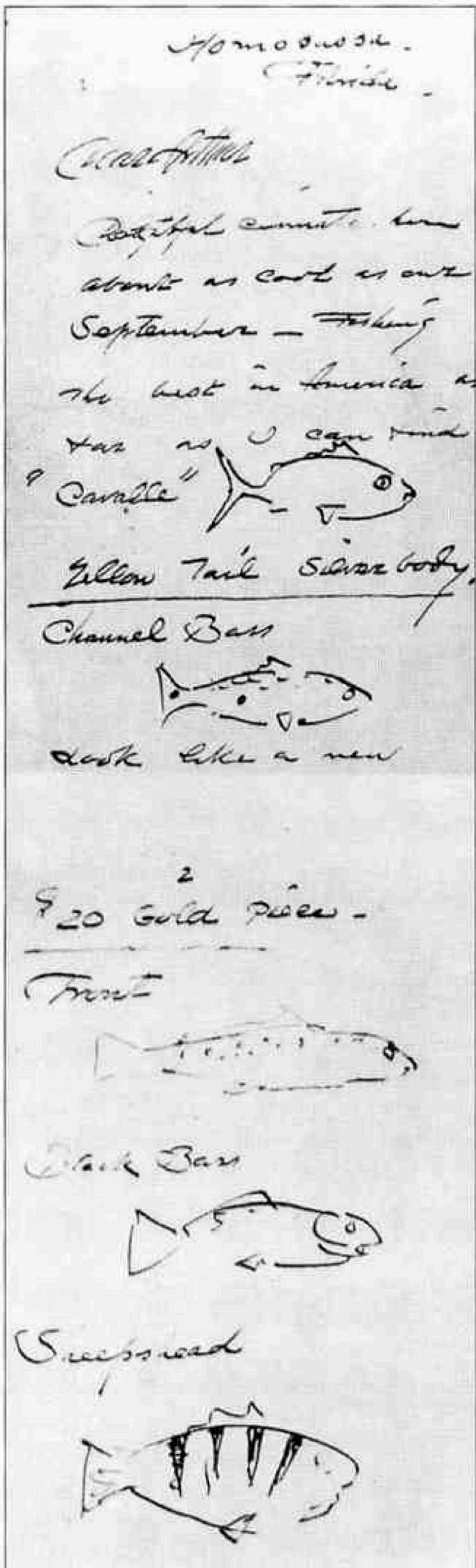
In the Addison Gallery of American Art, at Andover, Massachusetts, hangs a splendid example of Winslow's Homer's watercolor expertise. It's simply titled *Casting* and I like to think that the young man laying out a long line is doing it with the fly rod I once held. This painting is proof (if any is needed) that to appreciate superb watercolor technique requires no study or investigation. Homer was the best at this medium and fishing scenes were his finest subject matter. In my opinion, we have not yet seen his equal.

From *The World of Winslow Homer* (Time-Life Books, 1966)



Homer with his brother Charlie, probably at Prouts Neck, a rocky, wild peninsula on the coast of Maine, site of the family estate. There, according to one source, Homer liked to fish the ocean for flounder and tautog from the rocks, wearing sneakers.

From *The World of Winslow Homer* (Time-Life Books, 1966)

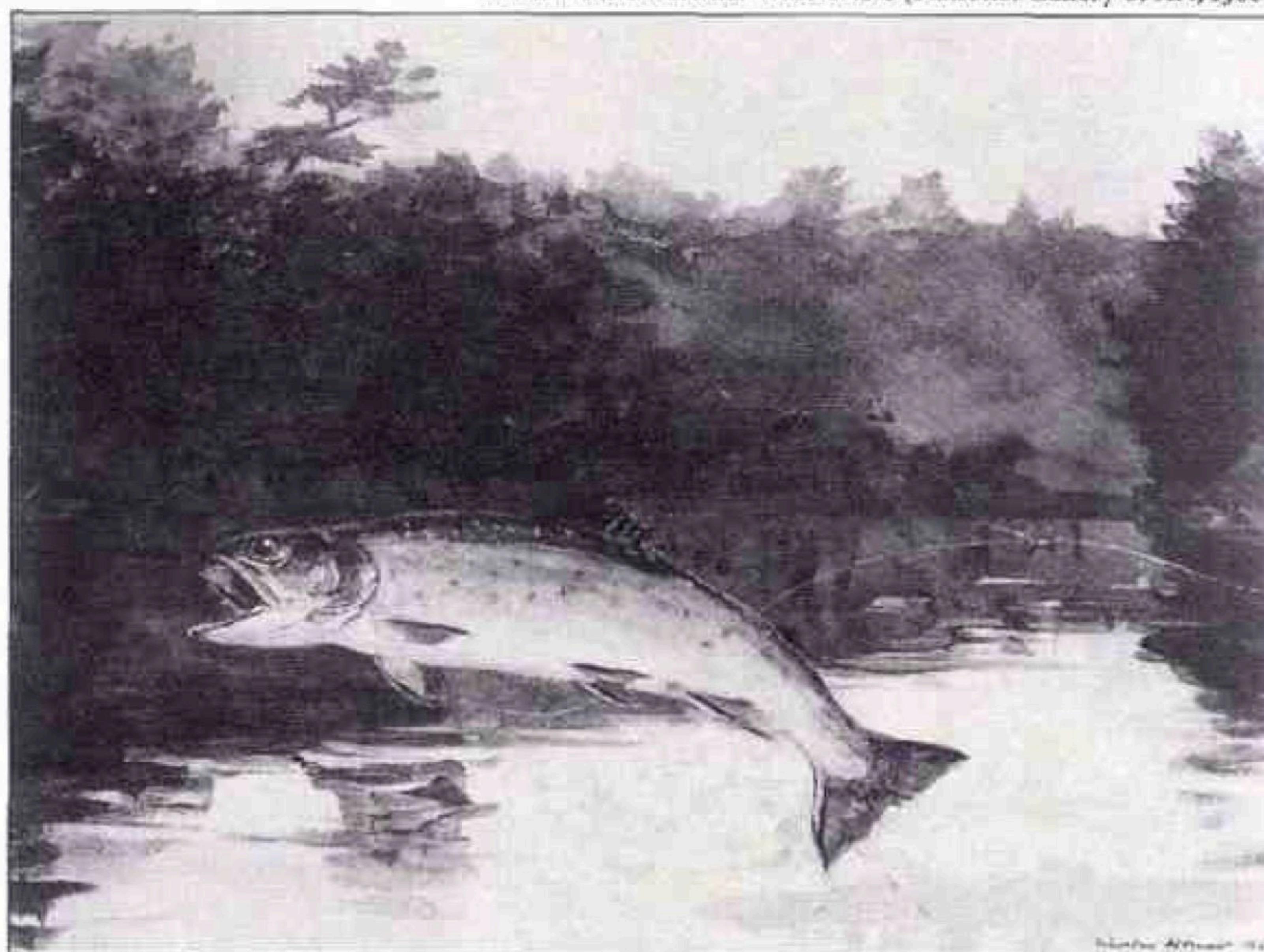


On his 1904 trip to the Homassie River Homer became excited over the new kinds of fish he was catching. He said the channel bass (soon to be the subject of a watercolor) "looked like a new \$20 gold piece." The fishing there was "the best in America as far as I can find."



**BOY FISHING**, 1892. In 1886, Homer and his brother Charles became charter members of the private North Woods Club, on the shores of Mink Pond in the Adirondacks. Homer would paint eighty-seven watercolors of Adirondack subjects over the next two decades, reflecting the new popularity of the area. Nearly one-third of the series are angling scenes and many feel these were the masterworks of his art, exhibiting a brilliance of color and a precise understanding of the action and atmosphere of the sport. Courtesy of the San Antonio Museum Association, San Antonio, Texas.

From Winslow Homer Watercolors (National Gallery of Art, 1986)



**LEAPING TROUT**, 1889. Homer is to be commended, in his sporting themes, for portraying only once dead trout displayed with rod and reel. He was far more interested in the fishes' action and their vivid coloration when alive. Most of Homer's leaping trout were painted in 1889 when he brought them up close to the viewer and imbued the canvas with atmosphere and life, capturing the moment as they flashed between sky and water.



*Two Men in a Canoe*, 1895, was one of a series of small monochrome watercolors based on Homer's journeys to the Saguenay River and its headwaters at Lake St. John in Quebec around the turn of the century. It took thirty-three hours to travel to Lake St. John from New York City and he treasured the remote location. This lovely, still painting evokes the spiritual quiet of the lake at sunset.

From Winslow Homer Watercolors (National Gallery of Art, 1986)



Detail of *LIFE-SIZE BLACK BASS*, 1904, one of the eleven Homassa River watercolors from Homer's 1904 trip to Florida, a series notable for their accurate detail and passionate energy and drama. The crimson salmon fly in the mouth of this thrashing black bass is unmistakable in the original watercolor.

## Homer's Secret

IN A VERY EARLY ISSUE of *The American Fly Fisher* (Winter 1975), Editor Austin Hogan stoutly declared that "Winslow Homer never fly fished or if he did, his many biographers kept it secret; his contemporary fly fishers never reported his casting a fly, which is particularly odd, nor did his brother speak of fly fishing, although he noted Homer to be a great angler. Homer's fly rod in the Museum shows little wear which proves nothing."

Hogan goes on to state that the canoe Homer used in his sporting watercolors was housed in his studio in Prout's Neck, Maine, and saw little if any real water. "The watercolors of this period are purely imaginative. Homer was a professional, one of the first to discover sportsmen would pay money for watercolors of fly fishers in action."

If one accepts Hogan's assessment of Homer's angling interest, how does one explain, then, the illustrated letter Homer wrote to his brother Arthur describing the new kinds of fish he caught on a Florida vacation or the photograph of Winslow and his brother Charlie posing with their ocean booty and a fly rod? And what about the artist's angling paraphernalia—including fly books—found heaped in that barn Jim Bashline describes? Helen Cooper, author of *Winslow Homer Watercolors*, says that, "As for whether Homer did or did not actually fish, I can offer no quote from the artist but I think the evidence of the watercolors suggests that not only was he a fly fisher but a very accomplished one."

EDITOR