

FROM THE MHS COLLECTIONS

WINSLOW HOMER'S H.W. BRYANT BOOKPLATE
DRAWING (1893)
PEN & INK ON PAPER
GIFT OF HUBBARD WINSLOW BRYANT, N.D.

When the Maine Historical Society was founded in 1822, there were only three other states in the nation that had similar organizations. It is therefore hardly surprising that the MHS collections are filled with unique and important objects and documents. One of the most delightful is an often overlooked little treasure: the drawing for the only known bookplate ever designed by the great marine painter, Winslow Homer.

The playful rendering features a mermaid frolicking in a sea of books, flanked by stylized dolphins and crowned by the motto, "Omne bonum Desuper" (Everything good from Above) with a plume of pine-boughs. The lower portion includes the date 1893 and "H.W. Bryant, Portland, Me." above a scalloped decoration with the initials "W.H." At the bottom of the paper is a penciled inscription: "With the compt's of Winslow Homer." MS collection 1309 includes a letter from the artist to Bryant, which thanks him for a book and states, "I am interested in this book plate and will immediately try my hand at it – and will let you see it soon." It is dated from Scarborough (Prout's Neck), December 15, 1892.

In 1892-1893 Homer was near the height of his career, working at Prout's Neck on such masterpieces as *Coast in Winter*, *Watching from the Cliffs*, and *The Fox Hunt*. That he enthusiastically took up a minor art project for an acquaintance suggests the painter was anything but the flinty recluse of legend. Both Homer and Bryant (1839-1917) were born in Boston to families with direct Maine roots and may have been distantly related. Homer opened his Scarborough studio in 1883. Bryant came to Portland in 1861 as an antiquarian bookseller, but quickly gave





Maine Historical Society members, 1892. H.W. Bryant, Society librarian and recording secretary, sits third row, third from the left

up his shop to become the bookkeeper for J.B. Brown & Sons, a job he held for thirty-six years. During that time he became a noted collector and a vital part of the local cultural scene. Bryant joined MHS in 1865 and, with James Phinney Baxter, became an important transitional figure in the Society's move from the Bowdoin Campus to Portland in 1881. He became the fifth Society librarian and recording secretary and held the former position until 1906. Bryant delivered the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Address which hinted at future headquarters in "a certain historic mansion." In 1897 he returned to book selling out of what he called "Ye Olde Curiosity Shop." During his long, fruitful association with MHS, Bryant gave a number of important papers to the collection, including a holding of autographed letters in which the bookplate was found.

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