



HAWTHORNE Fine Art

Samuel Lancaster Gerry (1813-1891)

Woodland Work

Oil on canvas

10 x 14 inches

Signed lower right

Samuel Lancaster Gerry was born in Boston in 1813 and while he had no formal training he was a leader of the White Mountain School during the 1840's. It is believed that he was strongly influenced by the Hudson River School artists Asher Durand (1796–1886) and Thomas Cole (1801–1848). Like many artists of the time period, Gerry traveled throughout Europe on a three-year long grand tour. When he returned to America, he set up a studio in Boston and made many trips from there to New Hampshire's Lake District and the White Mountains.

Gerry was a significant force in the local Boston art scene. He associated with the New England Art Union and the Boston Artists' Association, and exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. In 1857, Gerry co-founded the Boston Art Club, which promoted a democratic, cooperative relationship between artists, very different from the independent master-artist model in Europe. In addition to his presence in Boston, Gerry also exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the National Academy of Design, and the American Art Union.

Like most works by Hudson River School artists, Gerry's paintings of the White Mountains and Adirondacks were composite images made up of different locations blended to create sublime views of the mountains. He also occasionally painted views of the Hudson River Valley. While Gerry is known mostly for his landscape paintings he also painted well-respected still lifes, and portraits.

In *Woodland Work*, Gerry depicts the arduous task of stump grubbing, or tree stump removal. The methods of clearing the American wilderness had changed little since the settlers in the 17th century. In order to cultivate the land trees were first removed using a felling axe, by burning, or by girdling in which a large strip of bark was removed from around the trunk causing the tree to die and eventually fall naturally. The arrival of patent stump-pullers in the mid-19th century promised to ease the backbreaking labor of stump grubbing, but they were often impractical and costly. In order to extract the stump in *Woodland Work*, a *windlass*, or pulley was used to attach a cable around the stump to be removed. The three woodsmen on the right maneuver a large lever beside the stump while another man stands beside two yokes of oxen. To remove the stump, one end of the lever would have been chained to the stump while the other end was hitched to the oxen. The oxen then would be driven around the stump in a circle until it was twisted out of the ground.¹

¹ A.B. Allen et al., *The American Agriculturist: Vol. VIII*. (C.M. Saxon: New York, NY, 1849) 275.



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While images of woodsmen, felled trees, and tree stumps were commonly used in 19th century American landscape painting to symbolize civilization and the destruction of the American wilderness in *Woodland Work* Gerry has given us a rare glimpse into one of the many daunting physical challenge faced by American settlers.²

² Nicolai Cikovsky, "The Ravages of the Axe": The Meaning of the Tree Stump in Nineteenth-Century American Art." *The Art Bulletin* 61, no. 4 (1979): 611-26. Accessed July 20, 2020. doi:10.2307/3049941.