

## Chapter 4



*Rip Van Winkle*, 1829  
attributed to John Quidor  
(American, 1800-1881)  
Oil on canvas  
George F. Harding  
Collection, 1982.765

# Rip Van Winkle

attributed to  
**John Quidor**

## Overview

**J**ohn Quidor was born in 1800 in Tappan, New York, a town in the Hudson River Valley. His father was a schoolteacher. When Quidor was eleven, his family moved to New York City. At the age of fourteen, he studied with the well-known portrait painter John Wesley Jarvis. To earn extra money, Quidor painted banners and signs for New York City's volunteer fire department.

In 1829 Quidor began exhibiting his paintings at the National Academy of Design in New York City. Since artists had a hard time earning a living in the 1830s, Quidor left New York City to try farming in Quincy and Columbus, Illinois. After about twelve years, he moved to upstate New York, where he painted full-time until his death in 1881.

Quidor lived when the United States was a young country. He and other American writers and artists began to look to their own land and its people for subjects to write about or paint. Quidor enjoyed reading books by James Fenimore Cooper (also a resident of upstate New York), and Washington Irving. The artist often chose romantic and fantastic scenes from their stories to paint, such as this and other events from Irving's 1820 tale "Rip Van Winkle."



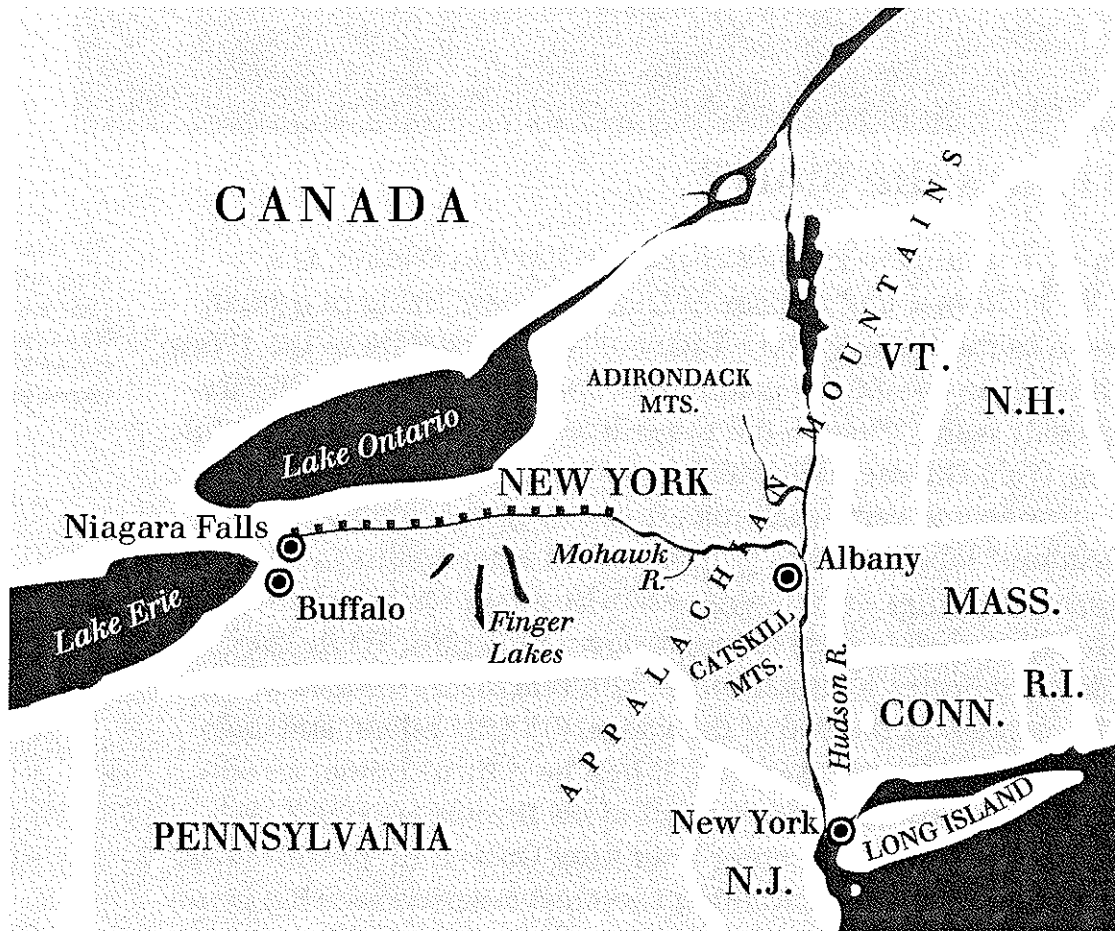
## What's the Story?

Washington Irving's character, Rip Van Winkle, is a hunter and trapper of Dutch descent living in a small town in the Hudson River Valley of New York State in the 1760s. In order to escape the continuous nagging of his wife, Rip frequently walks through the Catskill Mountains with his faithful dog Wolf. On one such trip, Rip is lured into a secluded glen by a strange and very small man dressed "in the antique Dutch fashion." Rip decides to join the man's companions in their game of skittles or ninepins, a bowling game in which a wooden disk or ball is used to knock down nine pins. While they play, Rip drinks a mysterious potion that tastes somewhat like Dutch beer. At the end of the game, Rip falls asleep and does not awaken for twenty years. When he returns home, no one recognizes him, his wife and all of his friends are dead, and George Washington, rather than King George III, presides over the country. After confronting skeptical townspeople, Rip is recognized by his daughter Judith, who takes him into her home to live the rest of his life in comfort.

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First published in 1820 in Washington Irving's short-story collection *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, "Rip Van Winkle" has become a classic of early American literature. The young United States was eager to have its own legends and myths featuring the everyday lives of its citizens. This story is based on a German folktale about a young goat shepherd named Peter Klaus, who was lured into a dell where twelve knights played skittles and where Klaus drank and fell asleep for twenty years. The small, secluded wooded valleys of the Catskills were a natural setting for an American version of the story.

This painting of Rip Van Winkle highlights Rip's emotions upon his return to his post-Revolutionary War hometown. Fantasy, nostalgia, and political commentary play equal roles in this interpretation of Irving's story.



## Ghosts and Relics

At the end of Irving's story, the mystery of Rip's long nap is ascribed to the ghostly appearance of Henry Hudson, the first European to explore the Hudson River and its immediate region. A town member explains that Hudson keeps a ghostly vigil over the area by appearing every twenty years with his crew and that they are seen on such occasions playing ninepins (skittles). Since Hudson explored the Hudson River in 1609 and thereafter appeared every twenty years, Rip would have fallen asleep in 1769 and awakened in 1789, the year George Washington (for whom Irving was named) was elected president. The portrait of George Washington that swings over the tavern's door in the Quidor painting highlights the young republic's pride in its heroic leader.

Quidor also included details that reflected New York politics of the early nineteenth century. The Dutch colonial settlement of New Amsterdam, which would become New York City, was founded in 1626 and was ruled for thirty-eight years by the Dutch before it was turned over to England in 1664. When Washington Irving was born in New York City in 1783, its twenty thousand inhabitants were still largely Dutch and many still spoke the Dutch language and practiced Dutch customs. By the time Quidor was born in 1800, both the culture and architecture of New York City were experiencing rapid change, although change came more slowly to the Dutch communities that filled the Hudson River Valley, the setting for Irving's story and Quidor's painting.

The early years of Irving's and Quidor's lives in New York City saw the end of traditional Dutch culture, as the city's oldest inhabitants became part of a larger, more diverse urban society. Changes made to the city's Dutch houses were the most visible symbol of this transformation. Characterized by step-shaped roofs, many of these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses were still standing when the Revolutionary War began in 1775. However, by 1820 most had been destroyed and replaced with buildings constructed in English Georgian and Neoclassical architectural styles. It is no accident that the houses in "*Rip Van Winkle*," set shortly after the American Revolution, still have the step-shaped roofs of the earlier Dutch buildings.

The newspaper *New-York Mirror* and other periodicals started a campaign in the late 1820s to save remaining buildings, featuring engravings of the endangered architecture and nostalgic stories about “Knickerbocker” (Dutch) taste in order to build public support. Although the cause achieved great notoriety, the last Dutch house in New York City was destroyed in 1834. During the 1930s, the Dutch house became a cultural icon with a wide range of associations surrounding the destruction of New York’s early history. Hence, the Dutch houses included in this painting suggest a wider context in which to understand Rip Van Winkle as a figure battling against forces of change beyond his control.

## What’s in the Painting?

**T**his painting illustrates the most dramatic moment of Irving’s story, when Rip awakens from his sleep and returns to his village, on what was an election day of the new Republic.

*The appearance of Rip, with his long grizzled beard, his rusty fowling piece, his uncouth dress, and an army of women and children at his heels, soon attracted the attention of the tavern politicians. They crowded round him, eyeing him from head to foot with great curiosity. The orator bustled up to him, and, drawing him partly aside, inquired “On which side he voted?” Rip stared in vacant stupidity. Another short but busy little fellow pulled him by the arm, and, rising on tiptoe, inquired in his ear, “Whether he was Federal or Democrat?” Rip was equally at a loss to comprehend the question; when a knowing, self-important old gentleman, in a sharp cocked hat, made his way through the crowd, putting them to the right and left with his elbows as he passed, and planting himself before Van Winkle, with one arm akimbo, the other resting on his cane, his keen eyes and sharp hat penetrating, as it were, into his very soul, demanded in an austere tone, “what brought him to the election with a gun on his shoulder, and a mob at his heels, and whether he meant to breed a riot in the village?”—“Alas! gentlemen,” cried Rip, somewhat dismayed, “I am a poor quiet man, a native of the place, and a loyal subject of the King, God bless him!”*

*Here a general shout burst from the bystanders—"A tory! a tory! a spy! a refugee! hustle him! away with him!" It was with great difficulty that the self-important man in the cocked hat restored order; and, having assumed a tenfold austerity of brow, demanded again of the unknown culprit, what he came there for, and whom he was seeking? The poor man humbly assured them that he meant no harm, but merely came there in search of some of his neighbors, who used to keep about the tavern. . . .*

*Rip's heart died away at hearing of these sad changes in his home and friends, and finding himself thus alone in the world. Every answer puzzled him too, by treating of such enormous lapses of time, and of matters which he could not understand: war—congress—Stoney Point—he had no courage to ask after any more friends, but cried out in despair, "Does nobody here know Rip Van Winkle?"*

*"Oh, Rip Van Winkle!" exclaimed two or three, "Oh, to be sure! that's Rip Van Winkle yonder, leaning against the tree." Rip looked, and beheld a precise counterpart of himself, as he went up the mountain: apparently as lazy, and certainly as ragged. The poor fellow was now completely confounded. He doubted his own identity, and whether he was himself or another man. In the midst of his bewilderment, the man in the cocked hat demanded who he was, and what was his name?*

*"God knows," exclaimed he, at his wit's end; "I'm not myself—I'm somebody else—that's me yonder—no—that's somebody else got into my shoes—I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and they've changed my gun, and every thing's changed, and I'm changed, and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!"*

As the above passage from Irving's story indicates, the crowd in the painting appears highly suspicious of Rip's outburst. An old woman leaning on a crutch, a pack of thin children, a young mother holding close her frightened child, and various other skeptical farmers and townspeople make up the crowd. In this scene, Rip seems trapped between the hostile people before him and the red-vested man who demands to know his identity.

## John Quidor (1800–1881)

**J**ohn Quidor was born in Tappan, New York, a town in the Hudson River Valley. He was the son of a schoolteacher, and the family moved to New York City when Quidor was eleven. When he was fourteen, Quidor was apprenticed to the portrait painter John Wesley Jarvis. It is possible that Quidor was also apprenticed at some time to a sign painter or other commercial artist, as he supplemented his income by painting banners and signboards for New York City's volunteer fire department. He also taught a number of aspiring artists. Four of Quidor's oil paintings were exhibited in 1829 at the National Academy of Design in New York City, an association that organized yearly exhibitions to showcase the talents of American artists and one that remains active today as a venue for historical exhibitions.

According to an anonymous reviewer of an 1829 show at the National Academy of Design, Quidor's painting, if exhibited in Europe, "would be bought at a handsome price, and the painter be thus encouraged and enabled to produce one still better. How it will be in America, one cannot say." The painting to which this quotation refers is thought to be the Art Institute's *Rip Van Winkle*.

Despite this promising reception, Quidor left the New York art world by 1837. He moved to Illinois and farmed for twelve years in Quincy and Columbus before returning to New York State. The artist painted for almost fifty years, creating landscapes, religious subjects, and portraits in addition to subjects drawn from literature. He based many of these paintings on the work of Washington Irving (1783–1859) and James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851). Their works — especially "Rip Van Winkle" and Cooper's *The Pioneers* — were among the most influential early writings on the geographical wonders of the Catskill Mountain area of upstate New York, which Quidor loved. Although Quidor's paintings were not intended to be book illustrations, it is thought that twenty-one of his twenty-eight surviving paintings are based on Irving's stories.



## Washington Irving (1783–1859)

**W**ashington Irving was the youngest child of a wealthy New York merchant who sided with the colonists in the Revolutionary War. The young Irving was trained as a lawyer before turning to journalism and literature. He had already achieved some fame as a writer when, in 1809, he published a comic history titled *Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, which earned Irving international attention. “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” were two of the classic stories included in Irving’s most successful book, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon of 1819*, which the author described as “found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker.” In reality, the book was written while Irving was living in England. In addition to popular fiction, Irving also produced essays, biographies, and historical works.

### Rip Van Winkle and the Arts

Throughout the nineteenth century, several versions of “Rip Van Winkle” were performed on the American stage. One of America’s leading actors, Joseph Jefferson (1829–1905), wrote and acted in the most successful of these productions, and he devoted much of his stage career to the exploration of this character.

## Glossary

**Apprentice:** One who enters a legal agreement to work for another for a specific amount of time in return for instruction in a trade, art, or business. Learning to paint as an apprentice was a centuries-old custom in Europe and was also practiced in the young United States.

**“Knickerbocker”:** The colloquial term for things of Dutch culture, such as houses with step-shaped roofs.

**Skittles or ninepins:** A bowling game in which a wooden disk or ball is used to knock down nine pins.

**Federal:** The term refers to the Federalist Party (1789-1801), which advocated strong central government and support of the United States Constitution.

**Democrat:** The term refers to the Democratic Party, which had its origins among Thomas Jefferson’s Republicans, who were strongly against the monarchy.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### *Rip Van Winkle* attributed to John Quidor

Read the passage from *Rip Van Winkle* (p. 90) on which this painting is based. Have students pick out the details from the passage represented in this painting.

- Rip with long grizzled beard and rusty fowling piece (musket)
- an army of women and children gathered at his heels
- an old gentleman in a sharp cocked hat
- Rip Van Winkle’s son leaning against a tree

Find Rip Van Winkle.

How can you tell he has been asleep for twenty years?

Imagine you fell asleep and woke up in twenty years.

How might things be different?

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Both Washington Irving and John Quidor were interested in transformations that happen over time. “Rip Van Winkle” was so popular that scenes from the story were painted by many artists and a number of theatrical versions of the story were performed to great acclaim in the nineteenth century.

### **ART ACTIVITY: *Before and After***

Read “Rip Van Winkle” by Washington Irving and illustrate another scene from the story.

OR, read another story by Washington Irving and illustrate a scene from it.

### **WRITING ACTIVITY:**

#### ***What Will Life Be Like?***

Imagine falling asleep for twenty years and waking up to a very different life. Write a story or a play about how things have changed. Describe how the environment, technology, fashion, politics, and your family and friends are different.

### **COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY:**

#### ***The Drama of the Story***

Produce a play using one of the scripts or stories written by the students. Different students can be responsible for different aspects of the production.

- ❖ Create the set. Choose students to draw or paint scenery on large pieces of paper.
- ❖ Make costumes for the actors. Choose students to make costume elements such as Rip’s tattered clothes.
- ❖ Choose actors for the play.

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