

Andrew Wyeth

Artist or Illustrator

In the summer of 1948 a young artist named Andrew Wyeth began a painting of a severely crippled woman, Christina Olsen, painfully pulling herself up a seemingly endless sloping hillside with her arms. For months Wyeth worked on nothing but the grass; then, much more quickly, delineated the buildings at the top of the hill. Finally, he came to the figure itself. There, Wyeth used his sense of Christina's inner youthfulness. He worked out the pose using his wife Betsy's 26 year old body – only the arms and hands were actually Christina's. For Christina's grey tangled locks he used the memory of his Aunt Elizabeth's brown hair. For the figure's shoes, he copied a German shoe Betsy found in an abandoned house. Finally the planning, the anticipation became almost explosive. Wyeth says, "When it came time for me to lay in Christina's figure against the planet I'd created for her all these weeks, I put the pink tone on her shoulder – and it almost blew me across the room."

Finishing the painting brought a sense of fatigue and letdown. When he was done, he hung it over the sofa and visitors hardly glanced

at it. In October, when he shipped it to a New York gallery, he told his wife, Betsy, “This picture is a complete flat tire.”

He couldn't have been more wrong. Within a few days, rumors about a remarkable painting were circulating in Manhattan and within weeks the painting had been purchased by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). When it was hung there in December 1948, thousands of visitors related to it in a personal way and it became one of the most popular works in the museum. Thomas Hoving, who would later become director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, recalls that as a college student he would sometimes visit MOMA for the sole purpose of studying this single painting. Within a decade or so the museum had banked reproduction fees amounting to hundreds of times the sum - \$1,800 – they had paid to acquire the picture. Today the painting's value is measured in the millions. At age 31, Wyeth had accomplished something that eludes most painters, even some of the best, in a lifetime. He had created an icon – a work that registers as an emotional and cultural reference point in the minds of millions.

So what are we to make of the work of Andrew Wyeth, that most puzzling and misjudged American painter of the second half of the 20th century. His work is as much admired and beloved as it is maligned and

misunderstood. There are those who describe his works as honest bulwarks of clarity defending us against degenerate abstraction and others who look upon his paintings as sickeningly popular, deliberately reactionary and coldly trite. In 1977, when art historian Robert Rosenblum was asked to name both the most overrated and underrated artist of the century, he nominated Andrew Wyeth for both categories.

Reading all of this early in my research was starting to give me a headache! After all, I have absolutely no credentials as an art critic, art historian, art scholar or have, by any stretch of the imagination, much background or experience in the visual art world. So, where to go with all of this and how to answer the question posed as the headline of this paper, *Andrew Wyeth – Artist or Illustrator*.

What I propose to do is this – tell you something of his life, his relationships and the arc of his work; delve into his creative process which I must admit I found as fascinating as the focus of my first Quest paper, Stephen Sondheim. Then, hopefully, we can all, collectively or separately, make our own decisions on that matter. So, to begin-----

Andrew Wyeth was born in Chadds Ford, PA in 1917, the fifth child of artist NC Wyeth and his wife, Carolyn. One of the most notable American illustrators of his generation, NC produced some 3,000

paintings and illustrated 112 books, including such classics as Treasure Island, Kidnapped and the Boy's King Arthur. Ferociously energetic, NC attempted to create a family life as studiously as a work of art, carefully nurturing the special talents of each of his children.

To all of them, NC was extremely attentive, and he provided all possible opportunities to pursue their interests. He also displayed a remarkable and unforgettable example of vibrant energy, disciplined ability, and love of nature. The family read together, played in forest and stream, took frequent walks, and celebrated their closeness to nature. Pageantry and costumes from the illustrator's collection made Christmas (with NC as Santa Claus) and Halloween memorable. There were always fireworks on the Fourth of July. NC brought romance and adventure to life for his children.

Andrew, the youngest child, was born with a faulty hip that caused his feet to splay out when he walked. Frequently ill, he was considered too delicate to go to school. Instead, he was educated at home with a succession of tutors and spent much of his time making drawings, playing with his collection of toy soldiers – he had more than 2000 – and roaming the woods with his friends, wearing the costumes his father used for illustrations. According to biographer, Richard Meryman in

his book *Andrew Wyeth: A Secret Life*, Andrew lived in awe of his powerful, seemingly omniscient father, who was nurturing but had a volatile temper. Famously elusive and secretive as an adult, Andrew likely developed these qualities, says Meryman, as a defense against his overbearing father. “Secrecy was his key to freedom”, writes Meryman.

As a boy, Andrew drew constantly and delighted his father with his developing ability and imagination. Once, as a young teenager, he built a miniature theater and made cut-out figures to perform for him on strings. Andrew prepared the dialogue and played a Bach record as background. At the end of the evening’s entertainment, NC announced that his son would begin regular work in his studio. There followed the only art lessons Andrew ever had.

By all accounts, NC’s tutorials were exacting and relentless. He insisted that Andrew pursue the fundamentals of drawing before beginning to paint. He made studies of basic shapes in charcoal and did pen and ink work, he copied plaster casts, he drew and redrew a human skeleton – and drew it again, from memory. Then, after two years of instruction, his father set him loose.

Andrew’s first notable works were watercolors of Maine that reflect the influence of Winslow Homer, produced in the summer of

1936 when he was 19. Fluid and splashy, they were dashed off rapidly – he once painted eight in a single day.

“They look magnificent,” his father wrote to him after Andrew had sent a cluster of them home to Chadds Ford. “With no reservations whatever, they represent the very best watercolors I ever saw.” NC showed the pictures to art dealer Robert Macbeth, who agreed to exhibit them. On October 19, 1937, five years to the day after he entered his father’s studio, Andrew Wyeth had a New York City debut. It was the heart of the depression but crowds packed the show and it sold out on the second day. At the age of 20, Andrew Wyeth had become an art world celebrity.

But Wyeth had already begun to feel that watercolor was too facile. He turned to the Renaissance method of tempera – egg yolk mixed with dry pigment – a technique he learned from his sister Henriette’s husband, Peter Hurd, the well-known Southwestern painter. By 1938, Wyeth was devoting most of his attention to that medium. He was also gradually emerging from his father’s shadow, a process that was hastened by the arrival of a new person in his life, Betsy James.

Andrew met Betsy, whose family summered in Maine, in 1939, and he proposed to her when they had known each other for only one week. They were married in May 1940; Andrew was 22, Betsy, 18. Beautiful, sensitive, unconventional, intuitive and highly intelligent, she not only managed household affairs and raised their two sons – Nicholas, now an art dealer, and James (Jamie), a much-exhibited painter and watercolorist – but she also became Andrew’s protector, his model and his principal artistic guide, taking over the role his father had performed so assiduously.

“Betsy made me into a painter I would not have been otherwise,” Wyeth told Meryman. “She didn’t paint the pictures. She didn’t get the ideas. But she made me see more clearly what I wanted. She’s a terrific taskmaster. Sharp. A genius in this kind of thing. I had a severe training with my father, but I had a more severe training with Betsy. I knew what my drive was and I wanted like hell to paint. Betsy galvanized me at the time I needed it”.

He needed it for his father did not approve of his subdued, painstaking temperas. He was particularly disparaging about Andrew’s 1942 tempera of three buzzards soaring over Chadds Ford. “Andy, that doesn’t work,” he said. “That’s not a painting”. Discouraged, Andrew

put the painting in his basement where his sons used it as the base for their model trains. Only years later, did he return to it. He finished the work, titled *Soaring*, in 1950; it was exhibited at Robert Macbeth's gallery that same year.

On the morning of October 19, 1945, NC was on an outing with his grandson and namesake, three year old Newell Convers Wyeth, the child of Nathaniel. At a railroad crossing by the farm of a neighbor, Karl Kuerner, the car NC was driving stopped while straddling the tracks – no one knows why. A mail train plowed into it, killing NC and little Newell instantly

After that, Andrew's work became deeper, more serious, and more intense. "It gave me a reason to paint, an emotional reason," he said. "I think it made me." One day, walking close to the tracks where his father was killed, he spotted a friend, Allan Lynch, running down the hill facing the Kuerner farm. Wyeth joined him. The two found an old baby carriage, climbed into it together, and rolled down the hill, both of them laughing hysterically. He spent the whole winter painting *Winter 1946*, which depicts Lynch running down the hill, chased by his shadow. "The boy was me at a loss, really," he told Meryman. "His hand, drifting in the air, was my hand, groping, my free soul."

In the painting, the hill is rendered with tiny, meticulous, but also strangely unpredictable, strokes, anticipating the hill Wyeth would paint two years later in *Christina's World*. In *Winter*, Wyeth has said, the hill became the body of his father. He could almost feel it breathe. Before the death of NC, says Andrew, "I just wanted to paint. My father's death put me in touch with something beyond me, things to think about and feel, things that meant everything to me."

In 1948, he painted *Karl*, the quintessential Wyeth tempera portrait, which he believed was the best he had ever done. Wyeth was furious with himself for not painting his father. He said, "I'm still sick about it. So many things I've missed. Why the hell didn't I ask him" I latched onto Karl Kuerner because he was the closest thing I knew to a power. I was terrified of my father as well as loved him. That's where Karl was the image of my father – there was a bite there – dangerous – not to be fooled with".

In 1950, two years after he painted *Christina's World*, Wyeth was diagnosed with a potentially fatal disease of the bronchial tubes. Most of a lung had to be removed. During the operation, Wyeth's heart began to fail, and he later reported having had a vision in which he saw one of his artistic heroes, the 15th century painter Albrecht Durer, walk toward

him with his hand extended, as if summoning him. In his vision, Wyeth started toward his hero, and then pulled back as Durer withdrew.

The operation severed the muscles in Wyeth's shoulder, and it was unclear for a time whether he would ever paint again. During weeks of recuperation, he took long walks through the winter fields, wearing a pair of old boots that had once belonged to Howard Pyle, his father's teacher and mentor.

Trodden Weed, which Wyeth painted several weeks after surgery – his hand suspended by a sling hung from the ceiling – depicts a pair of French cavalier boots in full stride across a landscape. Wyeth has said that the painting reflects a kind of self-portrait and a meditation on the precariousness of life. Thomas Hoving considers *Trodden Weed* a pivotal point in Wyeth's career; "He never again became sentimental, ever – his work took on more solemnity; he became more thoughtful."

By the time of his rehabilitation, Wyeth had achieved a signature look and a distinctive personal approach, finding nearly all his subjects within a mile or so of the two towns in which he lived – Chadds Ford, PA and Cushing, Maine. "I paint the things I know best," he has said. Many of his most memorable paintings of the 1960s and '70s focus on

just two subjects – the Kuerner farm in Chadds Ford and the Olson house in Cushing.

Then, in 1986, Wyeth revealed the existence of 240 sketches, studies, drawings and paintings (many of them sensuous nudes) of his married neighbor, Helga Testorf.

Helga was Wyeth's model for 15 years. He did not tell Betsy, and he hid most of the paintings. The secret collection was exhibited in 1987 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. The pictures then traveled to six other major museums throughout the United States and were seen by a million Americans. They triggered a front-page uproar in the press – including simultaneous cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek* – and they severely damaged Wyeth's standing in the art world.

In fact, the real story of Helga is a textbook study of the modus operandi of Wyeth, whose nature and art are all about hiding. In Wyeth's head he had no choice. To paint as he wished, he had to break loose from Betsy's influence. Wyeth depended on her so much he began to wonder if he could do anything away from her. He said, "Betsy's a really remarkable person to have around because she's full of bright

thoughts and new ways of expressing things. But, I felt regimented - I had to break that bond, flex my muscles on my own.”

Because the prime Helga paintings were kept together and secret, the series could exist in Wyeth’s head as a single painting, a fifteen-year reverie. He says that he was almost writing a journal of an experience, coughing up his own life. He says, “I had to do something absolutely alone, so that I could do it for a long period of time – break the rhythm of finish and sell. That puts a fence around you.”

Betsy’s curiosity and suspicion could be aroused by any decrease in her husband’s normal output of paintings. So he had to maintain his normal flow. Throughout the years of the Helga series, he delivered 55 temperas on other subjects. He was able to do this because, in fact, Wyeth did not paint a large number of Helga’s. In reality, the collection of 240 pieces contained just 4 temperas, 12 dry brushes and 29 watercolors. The rest were quick watercolor and pencil studies.

But keeping up the Helga deceit was becoming increasingly confining. He missed reactions from viewers, the clues that tell him whether a picture communicates, whether it has power, whether he succeeded. He began trying out paintings on a few trusted people – one, his son, Jamie. But always, there was just this one person whose opinion

truly mattered, who could ease his self-doubts, could tell him whether these pictures were “such a move ahead.” He said, “I know the pictures are uneven. But the good ones have a depth I haven’t reached before, some of the most powerful work I’ve ever done”.

Now he needed to know whether his judgment was accurate. He needed the moment when the artist with a mysterious intuition can see the work with a relentless, impersonal clarity – in Wyeth’s case; see the paintings through Betsy’s eyes.

The prospect of revealing the full collection to Betsy was necessary but terrifying. She might be irreconcilably furious. However, in October 1987, Wyeth showed the entire collection to Betsy – with their son, Jamie, present as a buffer. Although Jamie remembers telling his father, “It’s your funeral.”

Andrew said, “Oh, they shocked her. The fact that I’d done these things. And she was thrilled. The bigness of Betsy is that when she saw those pictures, she knew the good ones.” She later told a friend, “If I hadn’t liked them. I’d have killed him.” Jamie telephoned Jimmy Lynch saying, “The old man has lost his mind. Don’t go near The Mill. You might get shot, or you might find the bodies.”

There is no doubt that Betsy was hurt – the central hurt was an artistic not a sexual betrayal. Wyeth had excluded Betsy from a prime episode in his career; he had denied her the mentor role fundamental to their marriage. She asked him, “Did you have an affair?” He gave what, with variations, has been his sole answer: “Don’t be ridiculous, Betsy, you know me better than that. I was painting, and it takes all my energy to paint.” Although, there is no doubt that an *Art and Antiques* article stirred the press frenzy. In it Betsy was asked what the Helga paintings were about and she naively told the truth. She said, “Love.” What she meant was Wyeth’s emotional involvement with every object and person he paints for an extended period - Christina Olson for 20 years, Siri Erickson for 10, the Kuerners for 34, Walt Anderson for 51 and Betsy herself, who has modeled through 54 years.

The Helga exhibition, wrote Douglas McGill in the *New York Times*, “has stirred a more intense debate among art professionals than any other museum show in recent memory.” The passion of the disagreement – the public delight and the establishment disdain – was a classic demonstration of Wyeth’s anomalous position in the art world.” As a youthful prodigy in the 1940s, Wyeth could still find a comfortable niche in the art world. MOMA exhibited him as a magic realist and

purchased *Christina's World*. In the early 1950s, Wyeth was an independent but respected player in a still eclectic art scene. But the tide of abstract expressionism was rapidly engulfing figurative art. In the sixties and seventies the New York School reacted against abstract expressionism, and the acceleration of styles became swift. There was pop art, op art, kinetic art, conceptual art, and minimalism. During this fast-forward in art history, Wyeth still had scattered critical appreciation. Nevertheless, in that era Wyeth was increasingly a name for everything that contemporary art in America wanted to leave behind.

Betsy Wyeth thinks the anti-Wyeth momentum increased radically in 1966 and 1967 when his massive retrospective toured four of the nation's top museums and drew record crowds at each one. At New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, lines of patient admirers stretched along Madison Avenue and halfway along Seventy-Fifth Street. Writes Brian O'Doherty, "For most of us, his stardom has cannibalized his art to a degree unprecedented by any other artist with pretensions to seriousness."

In the *Christian Science Monitor*, Theodore Wolff takes up the issue of Wyeth's popularity. "If there is one thing the elite of the art

world cannot abide, it is the realization that an artist they might admire is also the particular favorite of plumbers and farmers. It threatens their claim to ‘be special’, to have insights and sensitivities beyond those of ‘ordinary’ human beings. It is important to these people that art be perceived as something so subtle and innovative that only persons of unusual refinement and imagination could possibly understand and appreciate it.”

Wyeth himself takes a dour view of his popularity. “I am an example of publicity and I am grateful because it gives me the freedom to go and do better. But I never had any great idea that these people are understanding what I’m doing. And they don’t. I think you get fastidious if you want every little brushstroke to be understood. That’s a bunch of crap. Very precious. I think most people get to my work through the back door. They’re attracted by the realism and they sense the emotion and the abstraction – and eventually, I hope, they get their own powerful emotion.”

This seems an appropriate place to temporarily move away from all this titillation and speculation about secrecy, nudes, sex, publicity, and intrigue into what I found equally as fascinating. And that is, the Wyeth creative process.

The particular medium he uses for each painting is extremely important in expressing the various sides of his personality and the aspects of the subject matter. Watercolor expresses the free side of his nature; pencil has another quality of freedom where he can dart in and hit the precise small thing he wants. Drybrush is very often an intermediate state, halfway between washy watercolor and meticulous tempera. Tempera is something he uses to build; building in great layers the way the earth itself was built. "It is not the medium for swiftness or quick effect," Wyeth says. "You've got to weave it, as if you were weaving a rug or tapestry, slowly building it up."

For Wyeth, the first phase of a painting involves walking, looking, mulling over possibilities. He carries drawing materials and a watercolor kit with him everywhere and he draws all the time, waiting for something to ignite. Occasionally, he encounters an electrifying subject and moves immediately to watercolor or tempera. Sometimes, excited by the power of an image, he progressively brings it into focus in a chain of drawings and watercolors that are first fact-finding and then, simplifying. More often, he circles a subject, testing its potential and turning over its possibilities in his mind.

Groundhog Day is an example of the convoluted approach. One day Wyeth had lunch with the Kuerners in their farmhouse kitchen. He left and wandered around the farm but could not get the presence of the kitchen out of his mind. So, he started to make some drawings from memory showing Anna in the corner with the dog curled up on the cushion next to her. Inspired, he went back to the house and got Anna to pose but she didn't pose very well. Too restless and inaccessible, she departs the painting in a series of drawings that shift emphasis to the dog. At some point, he moves to watercolor which signals a higher level of excitement. Many, many, many more drawings and watercolors followed with items appearing, disappearing, changing –Anna, the dog, trees, a log, wallpaper, utensils, All this time, Wyeth is thinking about the final painting. At some point, he likes to gather all his studies, tack them on the wall or spread them out on the floor and begin the process of distillation. Finally, Wyeth was ready to begin his tempera, the slowest and most exacting of the mediums he employs. The distillation of Wyeth's concept in *Groundhog Day* demonstrates how the slow buildup of the tempera accompanies the process of stripping down the image. "It's not what you put in but what you leave out that counts," he says. Reconsidering *Groundhog Day* years later Wyeth said,

“Everyone’s away - I think you feel that winter is going to last a while.”

Karl Kuerner said of this painting, “It is very quiet when you are in this house alone. Andy painted the quiet right in this picture.”

Along with all his study of drawing, technique, art history and artists, he read Whitman and Thoreau. He valued Frost for his subject matter, his structure, and his dryness, feeling sympathy on many levels between his art and Frost’s. In music, he turned to Bach and Sibelius particularly. A good friend of his was Rudolph Serkin, the pianist, who once told him, “I don’t think you should ever strike a key, you should pull the keys with your fingers.” Wyeth thinks this is expressive of what he tries to do with his work. He tries to pull a mood from his paintings rather than try to force or strike something into it.

He has been a collector and careful observer of movies of many types. He enjoyed Shakespeare; Hamlet in particular. In fact, Wyeth has said that there is a quote from Hamlet that is his guide. Hamlet tells the players not to exaggerate but to hold a mirror up to nature. Don’t overdo it, don’t underdo it. Do it just on the line.

Intensity – painting emotion into objects is the only thing I care about,” Wyeth once explained. “There are people who like my work

because they're seeing every blade of grass. They're not seeing the tone. My mood is hiding behind the mask of truth."

Now that we have, hopefully, a better feel for Wyeth, the artist, let's pick up where we left off with Wyeth immersed in the furor surrounding the release of the Helga pictures. The Helga collection was sold in its entirety to Leonard Andrews for an undisclosed price although the best guess was \$6 million, the figure that Mrs. Thomas Hoving heard at a party from a banker at U.S. Trust, which made the loan. In 1990, Andrews sold the Helga Collection to an unnamed individual in Japan for a price estimated at forty to forty-five million dollars.

After the Helga paintings were released, catalogued, sold and exhibited, Wyeth suffered from extreme fatigue – he felt washed up, exhausted, he had colitis and couldn't eat – he told his sister, Carolyn, that he might never paint again. But, in 1989, he turned the corner into a new era in the arc of his work. He was finally down to the nub, painting his own life directly, not obliquely through his models. The pivotal transition into the new incarnation – releasing him from his doldrums – was the tempera *Snow Hill*, called by Wyeth "this old man painting". This time he painted the curtain call that finished the long

drama since his father's death. The painting includes some of his best known models, Kuerner's hill, and many of the icons from his decades of painting – you can even sense him – the white ribbon leads to a hidden figure, Wyeth himself.

In the last years of Wyeth's life, he was in poor health and there was a sense that he was living on nervous energy. However, in 2008 when Paul Theroux visited the Wyeth's on Benner Island in Maine, Andrew Wyeth showed no sign that this would be his last summer in Maine – that he had four months to live. Still painting everyday at the age of 91, he gleefully told the story of a recent experience. “A boat came by as I was on the dock, painting. Seeing me working, one of the men called out, ‘Is Andrew Wyeth still alive?’ Wyeth laughed as he repeated his reply; ‘Just about. Just about.’”

At his home in Chadds Ford on January 16, 2009, in the sort of weather he loved – the empty cold and the sharp sunlight of winter – at the age of 91, Andrew Wyeth died in his sleep. His wife of 68 years, Betsy, was at his side. He said, “When I die, don't ever worry about me. I don't believe in being there for the funeral. I'll be flying far away, off on a new tack. Something new that's twice as good”. As some of you know, in my past two papers I started my own little Quest tradition of

working in a bit of music. As I began this paper, I thought to myself, “No music for this one!” But as I read and researched and wrote, one fragment of a song kept running through my head, over and over and over. It was engendered by yet another Wyeth quote. He said, “So much can be said by so little. I think great simplicity is complex. To my mind the master is the one who can give the effect of great simplicity and breadth and yet you can go right up to it and enjoy it.” So-----

Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free

Tis a gift to come down where you are to be

And when you find yourself in the place just right

Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained

To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed

To turn, turn will be our delight

Till by turning, turning, we come round right.

Wyeth paints in layers; not just the layers of his favorite medium, tempera, but layers of ideas, thoughts, feelings, emotions, relationships, time. Richard Casey, a marvelous Civic Theater director from some years past always used to talk about subtext during rehearsals. He would say, “It’s not just the lines on the page – it’s your

character's background, who they love, like, hate, how they feel, it's all there in your head and in your gut under girding what you are actually saying." Betsy Wyeth once said about her husband, "He is the person he paints. His medium isn't acting or music; it happens to be painting."

Is *Christina's World* simply a powerful picture of a crippled woman dragging herself up a hill? Not to my mother. She saw herself in that picture as a young girl out in the fields of her family's farm in southern Illinois. Is *Groundhog Day* just an illustration of an empty farmhouse kitchen? Is *Snow Hill* merely some folks dancing around a maypole?

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I say – simply – Artist!

