



ANDREW
WYETH

IN RETROSPECT

Low Vision Gallery Guide

Andrew Wyeth: In Retrospect

This exhibition marks the 100th anniversary of Andrew Wyeth's birth, on July 12, 1917. Presenting Wyeth's art decade by decade, it spans the artist's long working life—seventy-five years, from 1937 to 2008. Wyeth painted nearly to his last days (he died on January 16, 2009) with his powers undiminished. Few other artists' careers run as steadily and prominently through the modern era.

An unrelenting realist, Wyeth nevertheless evolved, sometimes subtly but often dramatically. The exhibition shows Wyeth in every attitude: as the painter of large temperas that took months or sometimes years to complete; as the obsessive painter who pushed the exacting and laborious technique of drybrush watercolor to stunning extremes; as the master draughtsman who could render his subjects in pencil with almost photographic clarity, yet also fling ink and

watercolor to startling effect. This presentation shows something of his creative process, too: throughout the exhibition, constellations of works include preparatory drawings and watercolors that led here and there to a final statement in egg tempera. Finally, this retrospective exhibition charts the high points of Wyeth's remarkable career, from his first bravura watercolors and his greatest midcentury temperas to his last painting, which is shown here to a large audience for the first time.

Dreamscapes and Dramatis Personae

We think of Andrew Wyeth as a keen-eyed and exacting recorder of just what he saw—mostly, picturesque old barns, farmers, and lobstermen—but Wyeth’s pictures are fictions. People and places could send Wyeth into waking dreams that he pictured in detail. Each work is a mystery despite all the visual information Wyeth provides. They hint at stories that might explain what the pictures only suggest: isolation, marginalization, disorientation, angst, shock, or fear.

Critics have always measured Wyeth’s art against abstract painting. He was old-fashioned, they sometimes said, sentimental, an illustrator rather than a provocateur. But Wyeth found his way to a powerful symbolism through another modern art form—movies. When other artists were flinging paint to express the inner self and the modern age, Wyeth was obsessively studying the way

that cutting-edge filmmakers were taking realism beyond storytelling to explore the human psyche and to deeply engage their viewers.

Wyeth's dreams are set in two places: rural Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, where he was born and lived his entire life, and coastal Maine, where he summered every year until his death. The old, weathered Olson house in Cushing, Maine, and the Kuerner family's icy-cold white farmhouse on a dark hill in Chadds Ford—these are often the settings for his psychological dramas. Wyeth's characters are few: Christina Olson, Karl Kuerner, Betsy Wyeth, and Helga Testorf dominate. Wyeth's art made these unassuming models famous. Some of us know them already. Others will be introduced to them here. Each character comes to life before us in almost cinematic clarity. And yet all of them were being directed to play a part—not from their lives, but from the artist's own.

Below Dover, 1950

Tempera on hardboard panel

Collection of Phyllis and Jamie Wyeth

This Friendship sloop, a distinctive and classic Maine fishing boat, is incongruously trapped in a sea of marsh grass. This is Wyeth's fantasy, another kind of symbol of constraint, like Christina Olson, famously painted by Wyeth as a woman crawling, inexplicably, toward home. Abandoned off Delaware Bay, below Dover, Delaware, if the painting's title can be taken literally, the Maine boat is out of place. Its bowsprit points seaward, and homeward toward Maine.

Sea Dog (study), 1971

Tempera on hardboard panel

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Wyeth's portrait study of his close friend Walt Anderson is as fresh and direct as a snapshot. Wyeth and Anderson had grown up together in their summers in Port Clyde, Maine. The artist painted Anderson many times throughout their lives, watching Anderson's character develop and coming to the realization that the lines of Anderson's weather-beaten face recorded something of Wyeth's own life, too, so close were the two men for so long.

Christina Olson, 1947

Tempera on hardboard panel

Myron Kunin Collection of American Art,
Minneapolis, Minnesota

One day I came in and saw [Christina] on the
back door step in the late afternoon. She had
finished all her work in the kitchen and there she
was sitting quietly, with a far-off look to the sea.
At the time, I thought she looked like a wounded
seagull with her bony arms, slightly long hair
back over her shoulder, and strange shadows
of her cast on the side of the weathered door,
which had this white porcelain knob on it.

— Andrew Wyeth

Karl, 1948

Tempera on hardboard panel

Private collection, courtesy of Albuquerque Museum

Karl Kuerner was Wyeth's near neighbor, and the man and his cattle farm came to loom large in Wyeth's imagination after the death of the artist's father on the train tracks that ringed the Kuerners' property. Many of Wyeth's psychological dramas are set there.

One day while at work on a still-life study of Karl's smokehouse sausages curing on the ominous iron hooks driven into the ceiling of the Kuerners' attic room, Wyeth asked Karl to pose. Suddenly, his model grabbed a sausage from the hook above his head and violently took a bite. Violence seemed then to permeate that room—the hooks, the sausages, Karl's brute force. At that moment, Karl offered Wyeth a glimpse into a man's dark side.

Maga's Daughter, 1966

Tempera on hardboard panel

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

It's more than a picture of a lovely looking woman. It's blood rushing up. Portraits live or not on such fine lines! What makes this is that odd, flat Quaker hat and the wonderful teardrop ribbons and those flushed cheeks.

—Andrew Wyeth

The subject is the artist's wife, vivacious Betsy James Wyeth. The title refers to a term of endearment for Bess, or "Maga," James, Betsy's mother, whom Wyeth had grown especially close to before she died in 1959. Two generations of James women are here: Betsy, whose own beauty was a tribute to her mother's; and Bess, who is physically present in the linen fragment that had once been hers and is now the frame's liner. The embroidery on it was done by a friend.

Prelude: 1937-1945

Within a decade, Andrew Wyeth evolved from a supremely gifted chip off the old block of his famous father, illustrator Newell Convers Wyeth, to a thoroughly modern artist, whose work entered the Museum of Modern Art's collection in 1948. He had entered his father's studio for formal art training in 1932, when he was fifteen. In 1937, when he was just nineteen, his New York debut, with dashing watercolors of Maine light and life, sold out. He even tried illustration himself. He shunned his early success in watercolor, however, to get ever closer to a new kind of subject matter—subjects that speak to wartime and economic bust—in the slow, meditative technique of egg tempera.

All the effort he poured into developing tempera in the war years was prelude to the emotionally charged work that came at war's end—not in response to war, but as a reaction to a death much

closer to home: the unexpected, tragic death of his father. On October 19, 1945, N.C. Wyeth was killed at the railroad crossing near the Wyeths' home when his car was struck by an oncoming train. Shaken to his core, Wyeth turned inward to memories and his own imagination. A cast of characters and set pieces, seemingly haunted landscapes and interiors, emerged in Andrew Wyeth's art from a wellspring of grief.

Lobsterman (Walt Anderson), 1937

Watercolor on paper

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford,
Pennsylvania. Anonymous Gift, 2013

The loose, transparent watercolors displayed here are unlike the watercolors elsewhere in the exhibition, which show the drybrush technique that became Wyeth's signature style. These examples are among his first paintings, all done on the Maine coast where the Wyeth family summered. They show his mastery of what was then the modern approach to watercolor—boldly gestural and displaying dramatic strokes of wet, transparent watercolor as if painting with pure light. Wyeth was immediately declared the successor to the country's most famous and innovative turn-of-the- twentieth-century watercolorist, Winslow Homer, also of Maine. But this style soon proved unsatisfying—it came too easily to him, Wyeth believed.

Coming Storm, 1938

Watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Clump of Mussels, 1939

Watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Nature is not lyrical and nice. In Maine I'd lie on my belly for an hour watching the tide rising, creeping slowly over everything—the shells that were drying in the sun. Nothing can stop it—amazing—sad.

— Andrew Wyeth

Lobster #4, 1940

Watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Night Hauling, 1944

Tempera on hardboard panel

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine,
Gift of Mrs. Ernestine K. Smith in memory of her
husband, Barwell B. Smith

In this work, a close friend from Maine, Walt Anderson, is stealing another fisherman's lobster pot in the dark of night. This night world of the young lobster thief is dangerous, but it is also enchanting, as Wyeth shows us. The water seemingly "filled with fire," Wyeth remembered, and "each dip of the blade of the oar made the water into a star light sky." The water is illuminated by a mysterious bioluminescence of plankton and sea creatures that makes it seem like another cosmos.

Oil Lamp, 1945

Tempera on hardboard panel

Collection of Phyllis and Jamie Wyeth

When he first met the Olsons, it was Alvaro, Christina's brother, who fascinated Wyeth as a subject for his painting. He got Alvaro to pose for him for weeks to make this tender portrait in tempera. Alvaro had made great sacrifices, giving up his independent fisherman's life to care first for his arthritic father and then his sister. Here, Wyeth has painted Alvaro's physical isolation. He seems almost to barricade the kitchen door behind him, yet has faraway thoughts, perhaps. He has been reading the newspaper this summer night, no doubt about troops returning from Europe and of the pending allied invasion in Japan in what would become the closing months of the war.

Frog Hunters in the Brandywine Valley, 1941

Tempera on hardboard panel

Private collection

Wyeth had an eye for unusual composition. He dramatically collapsed this river scene by employing a rapid change in scale, from the enormous skunk-cabbage plants in the foreground to the tiny figures near the top of the panel. In this swampy backwater of the Brandywine River, men are spearing, or “jigging,” for frogs as the river folk always did. We listen along with them as they are guided by the intermittent sounds of their prey. The painting relates closely to illustrations Wyeth made in 1941 for Henry Seidel Canby’s history of the storied Brandywine River. Wyeth was initially tempted to follow his father into illustration, but his new bride, Betsy James Wyeth, whom he had married in 1940, would have nothing of that kind of bread-and-butter work for her husband.

Winter Fields, 1942

Tempera on hardboard panel

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Benno C. Schmidt in memory of Mr. Josiah Marvel, the first owner of this picture, 1977

“You don’t have to paint tanks and guns to capture war,” Wyeth said. “You should be able to paint it in a dead leaf falling from a tree.” To get at the violence that in the war years pierced the calm of even remote Chadds Ford, Wyeth assigned roles for nature and landscape to play in poignant narratives of loss and death. Here a dead crow is frozen stiff in a field drained of color, fallen like so many soldiers in the killing fields of any war.

Public Sale, 1943

Tempera on hardboard panel

Philadelphia Museum of Art, 125th Anniversary

Acquisition, Bequest of Margaret McKee Breyer, 2000

In taking up tempera, Wyeth followed a revival of the ages-old medium popular at this time. But his father, N.C. Wyeth, never understood why this unyielding medium became his son's preference—or comprehended his son's desire to paint the somber-colored and timeworn landscape and its sobering, gray moods. But this was home, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, the place where Andrew Wyeth felt deeply rooted.

Here, tempera imparts a violent life-and-death struggle to the land. The scene is the foreclosure sale of a local farm—but it was a familiar one across the country by the 1940s. The farm was centuries old,— but the way of life it now offered, in a time of economic bust, was tenuous.

Mother Archie's Church, 1945

Tempera on hardboard panel

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy,
Andover, Massachusetts, Museum Purchase, 1946

A humble, crumbling monument to peace in a time of world war—that was how Wyeth might have seen the decaying Mother Archie's church in 1945. The old Quaker meetinghouse and school stood on what had been contested ground in the bloody Battle of the Brandywine in 1777, and now it demarcated the implied border between Chadds Ford's old European immigrant families and its black residents—here was Little Africa. The eighteenth-century stone octagon building was acquired in 1871 by The Reverend Lydia Archie, the first ordained female preacher in the African Union Methodist Protestant Church, as a home for a congregation. Wyeth remembered attending services here on occasion, but eventually the old building just collapsed.

Spring Beauty, 1943

Drybrush watercolor, ink, and pencil on paper
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of
Nebraska—Lincoln, UNL—F.M. Hall Collection

Always sharpening his hyperrealism, Wyeth refined an approach to watercolor painting, one related to the slow, meticulous process of painting with egg tempera. He called it “drybrush,” and though other artists employed such a technique, the term is always associated with Wyeth. Drybrush describes perfectly the method: his soft brush was filled with color but wrung out and pressed into a point, thus enabling the artist to draw with paint—to render detail and build up textures by layering small strokes of dry color.

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

After his father's death in 1945, Wyeth rambled across the Chadds Ford hills feeling newly attuned to their associations with his home, his memories of his father, and the generations who had shaped this landscape and now haunted it. Kuerner's Hill, opposite Karl Kuerner's cattle farm and rising above the dreaded railroad crossing where N.C. Wyeth was killed, was a constant reminder—its mass, Wyeth said, suggested his father's heaving chest, while at other times, it was his grave. Kuerner's Hill figures prominently in Wyeth's paintings time and again, from its appearance in *Winter 1946*—Wyeth's first expression of his own deep grief—the puzzling scene of neighbor boy Allan Lynch running helter-skelter to its bottom, to its last significant inclusion, in 1989, in the imagined Yuletide round dance in *Snow Hill*, the title a reference to the great white whale *Moby Dick*—"a hump like a snow hill!"—that destroyed Herman Melville's obsessed Captain Ahab. Kuerner's Hill was a metaphor for Andrew Wyeth's own nemesis, his father.

Pa with Glasses, 1936

Charcoal and pencil on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Wyeth always regretted that he never painted his famous father, illustrator Newell Convers Wyeth, before the man's tragic death in 1945. But as a nineteen-year-old, Andrew made this pencil portrait. The challenge of drawing the man who was not just his father but also Andrew's teacher and toughest critic must have been daunting. "He'd look at me like a Brahman bull when he walked in the door to criticize my work," the artist remembered, "and if he was glowering, I braced myself. In a few incisive words he'd bit right at some puny characteristics in my nature." Though small in size, the portrait nevertheless conveys a looming figure. In life, N.C. Wyeth was domineering; in death, he haunted his son to the end of his life.

Hoffman's Slough, 1947

Tempera on hardboard panel

Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York,

Bequest of Jane R. Meyer

The Wyeth family's properties in Chadds Ford stood on hallowed ground. The bloody Revolutionary War battle of Brandywine took place in the mud flats known as Hoffman's Slough. Red tones comprise the many layers of color in what seems at first glance a lifeless, colorless field. The high vantage is one that Wyeth sought out in his melancholy moods. He regularly walked the ridge where he could watch the evening's shade pass over the valley "like the eyelid of night. It all had death moving in."

Winter 1946, 1946

Tempera on hardboard panel

North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, Purchased with funds from the State of North Carolina

One day a grieving Andrew Wyeth happened upon a local boy, Allan Lynch, running frantically down Kuerner's Hill toward the train crossing where N.C. Wyeth had been killed just months before. "The boy was me at a loss, really," Wyeth said.

In reconstructing what he saw and felt in that moment, Wyeth likely drew on the climactic final scene of director King Vidor's silent-film masterpiece, The Big Parade. An emotionally charged scene that always haunted Wyeth, it shows a soldier, maimed in a senseless war, as he runs erratically on one leg down a hillside into the arms of a woman who offers love and solace.

Trodden Weed, 1951

Tempera on hardboard panel

Collection of Phyllis and Jamie Wyeth

Wyeth painted himself here, focused now on the world at his feet. He wears swashbuckler's boots that had once been props for his father's teacher, the illustrator Howard Pyle. The daily walks Wyeth made in them were essential restorative treks—in mid-January 1951, he had undergone lung surgery that nearly killed him. "You can be in a place for years and years and not see something," the artist once explained, "and then when it dawns, all sorts of nuggets of richness start popping all over the place. You've gotten below the obvious." Wyeth undeservedly earned the epithet "every blade of grass" painter. The tendrils of straw here are anything but. This is a field of pure abstraction, capturing qualities and rhythms of nature.

Snow Flurries, 1953

Tempera on hardboard panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of Dr. Margaret L. Handy, 1977

Tempera has a cocoon-like feeling of dry
lostness—a strange removed quality almost
like a ghost.

—Andrew Wyeth

Wyeth claimed that he could stare into the past in the Chadds Ford hills, their landmarks whispering of human presence: here an old wagon path now leads to nowhere. In the far-off distance, on the horizon at center, is a snow-covered sliver of the landmark that stood always like the round-topped grave of his dead father—Kuerner's Hill.

Cooling Shed, 1953

Tempera on hardboard panel

Philadelphia Museum of Art, 125th Anniversary

Acquisition, Gift of Frank A. Elliott, Josiah Marvel,

and Jonathan H. Marvel in memory of Gwladys

Hopkins Elliott, 1998

In his imagination, Wyeth said, the centuries-old milk-cooling shed at the Wylie farm in Chadds Ford was a wondrous house of cards, the kind he had built as a child. The broad boards had shifted over time and come to rest at strange angles. Wyeth recalled that within the cool interior, he could imagine a medieval cell, with the battered pails, in their sheen and by their sound, suggesting knights' helmets. It was just a modest structure in truth, but in Wyeth's estimation, it might be a hallowed setting from the tales of Robin Hood, which he enacted as a boy and read in the book vividly illustrated by his father, N.C. Wyeth.

War and the Movies: Obsessions

Andrew Wyeth: Metaphor

Directed by King Vidor, 1975

Released privately in France, 1980

© King Vidor Productions. Excerpted and reproduced by permission of Belinda Vidor Holliday from Metaphor: King Vidor Meets Andrew Wyeth outtakes, ca. 1975. King W. Vidor papers, 1936–1982, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Andrew Wyeth never served in war, but he was born under its cloud in the summer of 1917 and watched from the home front during the Second World War. His war was always the one played out in director King Vidor's landmark silent film, The Big Parade, which was set during the First World War and focused on the physical and psychological impact of war. Wyeth saw The Big Parade with his father when it was released in 1925, and somehow he acquired the film reels. Obsessively, he watched it over and

over again in his studio, hundreds and hundreds of times, over more than forty years.

What did Wyeth take from The Big Parade? In 1975 he had the chance to explain to director Vidor himself, in a film excerpted here. Vidor's camera had lingered, strangely, over small details. Striking visual metaphors were in fact Vidor's great original achievement with this film, and through Vidor, Wyeth came to appreciate their expressive power. A shoe, for example, is a "portrait" of the tragic hero of *The Big Parade*. A sharpshooter's medal on its own tells us poignantly that war has made men of boys all too soon. The deep, dark line of soldiers on their way to the front—"the big parade"—is death itself, leaving an indelible mark on the land. These camera shots were seared on Wyeth's memory and came out in his art "He's Bergman" in the artists' work.

“He’s Bergman”

The Seventh Seal

Written and directed by Ingmar Bergman, 1957;
released in the United States, 1958

Starring Max von Sydow (Knight), Bendt Ekerot
(Death), and Gunnar Olson (Church painter)

Excerpted and reproduced by permission of
Janus Films

More than once Betsy Wyeth likened her husband to director Ingmar Bergman, her comparison serving as a kind of tease for us to find the specific parallels in the artists’ work.

Bergman’s masterpiece, The Seventh Seal, has a lot to offer a figurative painter. With its spare dialogue (in Swedish with English subtitles), it is almost a silent film, in stark black and white, communicating powerfully through facial expression, body language, lingering camera shots, and cutting and framing devices for maximum tension. Its unsettling

imagery acts upon the memory and the psyche. The Seventh Seal takes on a subject that surely resonated with Wyeth: at its center is the artist who paints death, life's harsh truth that people will not see. Death is a principal character in the film, and metaphors of death appear throughout. Players confront the camera unflinchingly, as in Wyeth's Anna Christina. They are everyman and everywoman, the beautiful and the damned, allied without favor or mercy in death. In the end, Death leads them to their graves, but not until one last dance, a spirited dance of death atop a hillside, their profiles in bold silhouette against the white sky. It is this iconic final scene from The Seventh Seal that likely inspired Wyeth's own dance of death on Kuerner's Hill, his 1989 painting Snow Hill.

Northern Point, 1950

Tempera on hardboard panel

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, endowed by Kathryn and John R. Britton, 1950

The scene is Maine, the home of an old friend, lobsterman Henry Teel. Painting from the rooftop of Teel's old house, Wyeth could comprehend the shape of the curving shoreline of the narrow island that seven generations of Teels had called home—and he could see the overall pattern created by the island's distinctive textures. When Wyeth talked about the old slate-roofed house and the grassy fields and rocky ledges, he saw these things as Teel himself, the very topography of the lobsterman's weathered face. The thin lightning rod was like the buoys that marked Teel's lobster traps. Teel's house had the feel of a ship, too, much as it does here. It had been built in part from the wreckage of a man-of-war.

Spindrift, 1950

Tempera on hardboard panel

Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire,

Museum Purchase: Currier Funds, 1950

Spindrift—the title tells us that the Wyeths could see their Maine friend, the old lobsterman Henry Teel, in the stinging wind spray off the waves and in the dory that was an extension of the man himself.

Hen [Henry Teel] would go out early to tend his [lobster] traps, and I could hear his squeaking oarlocks and the sound of a trap hauled up and let drop down. He knew every bit of water he rowed in so well it was just a part of him. He'd land on the beach, step the oars, and get out all in one motion. . . . The dory was like a child to him. I painted it as a portrait of Hen.

—Andrew Wyeth

Teel's Island, 1954

Watercolor on paper with drybrush

Private collection, courtesy of Guggenheim, Asher, Associates, Inc.

Henry Teel had a punt, and one day he hauled it up on the bank and went to the mainland and died. I was struck by the ephemeral nature of life when I saw the boat there just going to pieces.

—Andrew Wyeth

River Cove, 1958

Tempera on hardboard panel

Portland Museum of Art, Maine, Gift of David

Rockefeller in honor of his son Richard Rockefeller

To look into the water is to see the sky, Wyeth reminds us here in this dizzying composition, and to look at the Maine shoreline is to see time itself in the once-living things that have been deposited here and in the tracks of a heron that will be washed away with the tide.

Christina

Christina Olson lived in her family's weatherbeaten house on their large saltwater farm on the Maine coast, near Cushing, among orchards and hayfields. She was introduced to Wyeth by Betsy James, Wyeth's future wife, in a fated encounter on the day when Wyeth and Betsy first met. Although he did not know it immediately, these two women would shape his art.

Christina figures in Wyeth's Maine paintings only after his father's death. Having lost the use of her legs at a young age, she was confined and cared for by her selfless brother, Alvaro. She became a symbol of endurance despite her frailty—she seemed to Wyeth, like the coast of Maine and the wind-battered Olson house, an emblem of survival.

Every summer until her death in January 1968, Wyeth painted Christina and the rooms of the Olson house. These few rooms were her entire world. Wyeth felt a kinship with Christina—the depth of her attachment to home matched Wyeth’s own—and her unselfconsciousness and honesty opened Wyeth to seeing and painting with a frankness that challenged norms.

Dodges Ridge, 1946

Tempera on fiberboard panel

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington,
D.C., Gift of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc., 1969

On October 19, 1945, Wyeth's father, N.C. Wyeth, was struck and killed in his car at a train crossing in Chadds Ford. The event was both traumatic and catalytic for Andrew Wyeth. "I saw the country even more simplified and somber in its quality," he said. Wyeth was not a religious man, but he felt a spiritual connection to the earth, sensing the pattern of life and death deeply in the landscapes he called home. Even Maine, where the artist's family had always summered, took on the color of grief in the months after his father's death. Here the remnants of a coastal farmer's wind-riven scarecrow suggest a long-forgotten grave and the spirit of a tormented soul caught in purgatory between heaven and earth.

Wind from the Sea, 1947

Tempera on hardboard panel

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Gift of
Charles H. Morgan, 2009

Of all my work at the Olsons this seems to me to be the one that expresses a great deal without too much in it. I walked up into the dry, attic room one day. It was a hot summer day in August, so hot that I went over to that window, pushed it up about six inches and as I stood there, looking out, all of a sudden this curtain that had been lying there stale for years, God knows how long, began slowly to rise, and the birds crocheted on it began to move. My hair about stood on end.

—Andrew Wyeth

Miss Olson, 1952

Tempera on hardboard panel

Private collection

The key to the Olson pictures is Andy's relationship with Christina—absolutely at ease with him. While she was posing, he said, “You have the most marvelous end to your nose, a tiny delicate thing that happens. . .” With a cloth he carefully wiped all the corners of that great face, all around the little places, around the lips, the ears. He said, “I’ve never felt such delicacy. You know, she’s like blueberries to me.”

—Betsy Wyeth

Incoming Fog, 1952

Watercolor on paper

Private collection

This tattered curtain hung over a side light at the front door of the Olson house in Maine. Decades of wind and incoming fog had shredded the delicate lace, and now it moved like a ghost from the house's past.

I had this very deep feeling that it would not be long before this fragile, crackling-dry, bony house disappeared. I'm very conscious of the ephemeral nature of the world. There are cycles. Things pass. They just do not hold still. I think probably my father's death did that to me.

—Andrew Wyeth

Lime Banks, 1962

Tempera on hardboard panel

Private collection

Even a dry white lime bank could possess hidden meaning and a rich cinematic quality for Wyeth the dreamer. Here were Maine's seafarers, he said, whose clipper ships carried lime to ports around the world; here were their white clapboard houses with garret windows where women waited for the sight of those ships returning home. This lime bank spoke of Maine's former glory: "the crown of the king of nature," Wyeth described it, now covered as if in cobwebs. He saw it flashing bright white in the moonlight. Returning to his studio that night, he drew the impression right on the wall, getting it down quickly to preserve it for painting.

Pushing Boundaries

In the 1950s and '60s, Wyeth opened up to subjects that had previously eluded him. Art making was a process of discovery now. He painted his longtime friends among the disappearing community of African Americans who were part of Chadds Ford's past. He painted his own family, too—Betsy (her portrait hangs at the entrance to the exhibition) and son Nicholas, included here. For Wyeth's art, the period from 1946 to 1968 began and ended with ruminations on death—his father's in 1945 and Christina Olson's in 1968—but those years also saw portraits that affirm connections to the living.

In his practice, Wyeth now took advantage of chance encounters and unplanned effects. The large tempera *Brown Swiss*, for example, developed out of the act of pouring paint. He made field notes

in pencil and watercolor at will, and even as he worked on a tempera in the studio, he returned again and again to his model and the subject's own space, making notes that would inform or alter his original conception. The drawings and watercolor studies included here are intended to show Wyeth's working method and his stunning command of a variety of mediums.

Raccoon, 1958

Tempera on hardboard panel

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford,
Pennsylvania, Acquisition in memory of Nancy Hanks,
made possible by David Rockefeller,
Laurance S. Rockefeller, Mimi Haskell, and The Pew
Memorial Trust, 1983

The artist was drawn to the ruinous condition of this old grain mill on the Brandywine River in Chadds Ford. He painted the heavy masonry, with its centuries of accretions, with a palette knife, an unusual approach to tempera for Wyeth. The miserable hounds reflect what Wyeth knew was the barbarism of the mill house's occupant, who kept starving coon dogs tethered outside the old granary—the suggestion might be of madness barely contained.

Betsy Wyeth soon purchased the historic mill property and restored it for the Wyeths' home and what she hoped would be a new studio for her husband.

Brown Swiss, 1957

Tempera on hardboard panel

Private collection

One November afternoon as he climbed Kuerner's Hill, Wyeth looked back over his shoulder and saw the Kuerner house mirrored, upside down, in the pond below, "the lucid pond looking almost like the eye of the earth looking up, reflecting everything in creation."

He worked in vain on a tempera that might re-create that vision. Then one evening he let loose: in a large bowl he made up a watery mix of yellow-brown ochre and red-brown sienna. He stepped back and threw the liquid across the panel. The dappled panel now looked like the hard ground scored by Karl Kuerner's Brown Swiss cattle. The picture of that original searing visual sensation, the eye of the earth, began finally to come into focus.

Young Bull, 1960

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Collection of Nicholas Wyeth

When Karl brought the young bull out for me, I painted him on the spot. He was symbolic of so much of what went on at Kuerner's—the cattle and the house and the hills—tans and whites . . . the golden hill rising up behind, the house on the left, and the window where Anna was. I could hear her shouting, and every time she did the bull's ears would flicker and twist, and suddenly I could see that pink of the inside of his ear. I'd bought this long, scroll-like piece of paper. I started with the house and got interested in the bull's head, and the rest kind of flowed out from there. I kept on unrolling the paper and the painting happened naturally. I was amused to be there by the road, in the country, just unrolling this scroll and getting it down. It has a different sense of movement because of that scroll.

—Andrew Wyeth

The Drifter, 1964

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Collection of Phyllis and Jamie Wyeth

The first drawings for this portrait were quite different. Then one day Willard became interested in looking down and watching me draw. It was as simple as that.

—Andrew Wyeth

Willard, 1959

Watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Willard Snowden knocked at the studio door one late fall day in 1958 asking for work. He ended up living in the studio for fifteen years, becoming a very important model.

—Andrew Wyeth

Monologue, 1965

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford,
Pennsylvania, Anonymous gift

Wyeth was mesmerized by Willard Snowden's eloquence and his mellifluous voice. Long monologues naturally rolled out of Willard when he posed. He would settle into a comfortable chair in the studio and just proceed to expound in professorial tones. Snowden had been a World War II veteran and a one-time merchant seaman. For Wyeth, painting Willard was a journey into other worlds.

Day of the Fair, 1963

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri, Museum Purchase

The season is spring, the setting is Wyeth's studio, and the subject is fourteen-year-old Cathy Hunt, dressed up for the annual May Fair at the Chadds Ford Public School. We feel her awkwardness—at posing, certainly, but perhaps with adolescence and burgeoning womanhood as well. The school's May Fair remains a celebration of the ancient rite of spring, and also of community and Chadds Ford's history. Cathy Hunt and the black population that lived around Mother Archie's Church were a part of that, too.

Nicholas, 1955

Tempera on hardboard panel

Collection of Nicholas Wyeth

Nicholas Wyeth is the artist's younger son.

Roasted Chestnuts, 1956

Tempera on hardboard panel

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford,
Pennsylvania, Gift of Mimi Haskell, 1971

Allen Messersmith, a neighbor boy in Chadds Ford, was a lifelong friend of Andrew Wyeth and an occasional model. Here he sells chestnuts at the side of the highway. Everything about the skinny boy and his enterprise suggest hard times. He wears a frayed World War II Eisenhower jacket, most likely from someone's discards. Messersmith was not a veteran, which we might assume from the picture, but he was a young man made old by circumstances before his time. He lived by himself in an old house near the Wyeths, a recluse his entire life.

Bushel Basket Study, 1958

Watercolor on paper with drybrush

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Milk Cans, 1961

Drybrush watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Pictures happen; you don't sit down to make them. One day I was down at Adam's farm in Chadds Ford and saw these intriguing rusted cans in the cold near that building where Adam kept his pigs. Rust, cold, snow, those hills.

—Andrew Wyeth

Winter Bees, 1959

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Collection of Phyllis and Jamie Wyeth

The comb was bursting with bees. I found it low down on an oak tree in the night, and I watched, entranced, listening to the bees. When the sun came out the next day, they'd come out and sit on my brush. . . . God, the quality of that transparent, golden honey in those incredible hexagonals is amazing! I didn't finish it because some animal came and ate it.

—Andrew Wyeth

Adam, 1963

Tempera on hardboard panel

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford,
Pennsylvania, Gift of Anson McC. Beard Jr.,
2002

The congenial Adam Johnson raised chickens and pigs on a small Chadds Ford farmstead that he had somehow assembled from scavenged materials. A tempera painting must be done indoors, so Wyeth had to collect the many pieces of Johnson's assemblage of a place in drawings and watercolors that he made on the spot and then transported back to the studio.

I did a big tempera of him in front of his pigpen with a flight of grackles shooting up behind him. . . . He could have been a Mongol prince—or Old Kris coming toward me, with all those jingles and safety pins and things on him.

—Andrew Wyeth

That Gentleman (study), 1960

Watercolor and pencil on paper

Dallas Museum of Art, Texas, Gift of the artist, 1962

“That Gentleman” was Tom Clark’s odd way of naming any and all objects—his shoe, his scissors, anything. For Wyeth, that phrase was Clark himself. This watercolor was an intermediary step in the process of moving from pencil studies—two are displayed nearby—to a tempera painting.

Mundane objects included in the picture speak to Clark’s fastidiousness and always dignified demeanor. We see his scissors—because Clark always saw to mending his clothes—and his slippers, which he always placed on a newspaper so as not to soil the tabletop.

Morning Sun (study for That Gentleman), 1959

Watercolor on paper with drybrush

Collection of Andy and Weston Fowler, Lookout Mountain, Tennessee

I work in drybrush when my emotion gets deep enough into a subject. So I paint with a smaller brush, dip it into color, splay out the brush and bristles, squeeze out a good deal of the moisture and color with my fingers so that there is only a very small amount of paint left. Then when I stroke the paper with the dried brush it will make various distinct strokes at once, and I start to develop the forms of whatever object it is until they start to have real body. But, if you want to have it come to life underneath, you must have an exciting undertone of wash.

—Andrew Wyeth

White Shirt, 1957

Watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Now about watercolor. The only virtue to a watercolor is to put down an idea very quickly without too much thought about what you feel at the moment. . . . With watercolor you can pick up the atmosphere, the temperature. . . . Watercolor perfectly expresses the free side of my nature.

—Andrew Wyeth

Garret Room, 1962

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Collection of Nicholas Wyeth

Wyeth was always inclined to see sleep as death, the memory of seeing his father's corpse.

Tom Clark, though napping, is suitably "laid out" here on his grandmother's prized patchwork quilt.

In Wyeth's imagination, Clark asleep was a king lying in state, and he wanted to impart "the feeling of party and holiday and bright-colored flags."

There was another sensory experience conjured by Clark's bony body among the lumps of the mattress: "echoes of a Christmas stocking I used to feel on my own bed. . . . When I awakened . . . it was thick and full, and there was some sort of figure sticking out of the top. . . . To me, Clark was like the stocking and the thing in the stocking."

Chester County, 1962

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Frank E. Fowler

The title of the painting may refer to Tom Clark's home in Chester County. Clark lived in the oldest county in the state, and he lived simply, in a three-room house without running water—this in a region known now for the elegant suburbs of Philadelphia's Main Line. The irony of Clark's Chester County address was likely not lost on the artist. He reminds viewers of another side of the area. But Wyeth admired Clark's dignified bearing, and always saw him, too, as a true country gentleman.

Tarpapering, 1952

Watercolor on paper

Private collection

Ben Loper and his son James could often be seen on the roof of their ramshackle shed putting down tarpaper. This watercolor is inscribed by Wyeth to his brother-in-law, artist Peter Hurd, who came to Chadds Ford in the 1920s to study with N.C. Wyeth and introduced young Andrew to tempera painting in the 1930s.

James Loper, 1952

Tempera on hardboard panel

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford,
Pennsylvania, Gift of Henry G. Haskell, Jr., 1971

Wyeth likened the enigmatic Loper to a silent-screen star—to John Gilbert, from King Vidor’s The Big Parade, a movie that fed Wyeth’s imagination to the end of his life. A man of few words, Loper always fascinated Wyeth by his characteristic far-off look, and everything about this composition sends our gaze up to Loper’s searching eyes. His frame seems too large to be contained in his old frayed clothes and shoes. Loper’s tall body is enclosed by the graceful lines of a pair of old scythes, symbols of death that Wyeth assigns to this elusive man, seemingly from a time long ago, a mystic of sorts who was known to roam around Chadds Ford in silent midnight rambles.

April Wind, 1952

Tempera on hardboard panel

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford,
Connecticut, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph R. Swan,
1957

The subject is the inscrutable James Loper, his face nearly obscured by the turned-up collar of his coat. We cannot know this elusive man.

Winter Light, 1953

Watercolor and pencil on paper

Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, Presented to Robert Frost in 1954, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, and given to the College in 1982 by Mr. and Mrs. Edward Connery Lathem

Wyeth told his biographer that he chose this watercolor himself to honor poet Robert Frost—a group of Frost’s friends had asked to purchase a Wyeth painting as a gift on the poet’s eightieth birthday. Wyeth loved Frost’s poetry, but he declined a request later on to paint the great bard’s portrait: “The art, the poetry, is the purest form. Not the man.”

The scene is of a lean-to behind the farmhouse next door to Wyeth’s studio in Chadds Ford.

Untitled Study in Kuerners' House, 1958

Watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

James Loper (study), 1952

Pencil on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

James Loper, 1951

Pencil on paper

Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst,

Massachusetts, Museum Purchase, 1952

Tom and His Granddaughter, 1959

Pencil on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth collection

Tom Clark's door was always open to Wyeth, and the old man was at the ready to serve as Wyeth's model. Wyeth was fascinated by Clark's tall, thin body and his bony, bald head, almost skull like. This exquisite drawing shows the depth of Wyeth's focus, on both his handsome model and the act of drawing. Tom is a strong presence; his granddaughter, who sleeps nearby, is elusive, only lightly drawn in. She was just passing through after a night out, her grandfather had explained to Wyeth, disapprovingly. "There he is so dignified, and she's almost disappearing, or maybe coming to life," Wyeth said of his record of that day.

That Gentleman (study), 1960

Pencil on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

To me, pencil drawing is a very emotional, very quick, very abrupt medium. . . . I will perhaps put in a terrific black and press down on the pencil so strongly that perhaps the lead will break, in order to emphasize my emotional impact with the object. And to me, that's what a pencil or pen will do. Any medium is an abstract medium, I suppose, but to me pencil is more abstract because it is an outline. I may go into tones at times but to me it is a very precise and very vibrating medium.

—Andrew Wyeth

Adam (study), 1963

Watercolor on paper with drybrush

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

I found a tremendous charge of energy in that
strange shack. It reminds me of a train barreling
down a track.

—Andrew Wyeth

Fur Hat (study for Adam), 1963

Watercolor and pencil on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

New Shock Values

The young Siri Erickson became Wyeth's fixation even as he painted his final tributes to the Olsons, and she would inspire his first nudes in tempera.

In the summer of 1967, Wyeth had a premonition of Christina Olson's death and felt compelled to paint her portrait for what he feared would be the last time. That fall in Maine, before he said goodbye to Christina, Wyeth had a chance encounter with another model, someone he felt could immediately fill the space in his imagination that Christina's passing would leave. And this model could take his art into unexplored realms. The new catalytic force was the thirteen-year-old Siri—"a burst of life, like spring coming through the ground, a rebirth of something fresh out of death," meaning Christina's death.

The path in Wyeth's mind that led from Christina Olson to Siri Erickson would soon take a more dramatic turn, leading to a new model, Helga Testorf, and a more wholly erotic art. "If you do this again, don't tell me," Betsy Wyeth said to her husband, chafing at the intimacy that her husband's paintings of Siri suggested. He was already painting Helga in secret.

The Patriot, 1964

Tempera on hardboard panel

Collection of Nicholas Wyeth

What are men capable of when compelled by patriotism? That is the question posed by Wyeth's favorite film, The Big Parade, and one Wyeth always asked about the war veterans he knew, like Karl Kuerner and Ralph Cline, a friend in Maine shown here.

Wyeth said that Cline's sharpshooter medal took him back to his own childhood memories of watching The Big Parade, of war play, and of poring over battlefield photographs with his father. The painting encompassed Wyeth's own imaginings of war and the conditions that try men's souls. As he painted what we would call the "empty" background, Wyeth claimed to hear "the thunder of the Meuse-Argonne" and feel and smell "the dirt and mud Ralph stood in in the trenches." The painting transported Wyeth to a place he long imagined, a place on earth where men killed and men died. Cline's portrait was a deeply personal painting for Wyeth, and he never parted with it.

Anna Christina, 1967

Tempera on hardboard panel

Jointly owned by the Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Anonymous gifts, 2002

Anna Christina—Wyeth’s last portrait of Christina Olson, done under a premonition of her impending death—is appropriately formal in its title. This would be her memorial—she died only months after the tempera was completed. The trusting relationship of artist and model is evident: Christina confronts the artist and the viewer completely unselfconsciously, and Wyeth returns the favor with unflinching honesty and respect. “A powerful face with a great deal of fortitude. The quality of a Medici head,” Wyeth described his friend. He painted Christina against an open doorway filled by a milky-gray rectangle of fog that had enshrouded the house for weeks. He saw, he said, how the dampness and filtered light brought out the light pink color of her skin and the striking clarity of her eyes.

Alvaro and Christina, 1968

Watercolor on paper

Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine, Museum

Purchase

Alvaro Olson died in Maine on Christmas night 1967, and Christina, without him, died just weeks later, in January 1968. When Wyeth visited the Olson house the following summer, he felt their loss acutely in remnants that were tossed so casually about now: at the doors leading into the house from the woodshed sat Alvaro's empty vegetable basket, and nearby, hung on nails as washrags, were pieces of Christina's pink dress and her apron. Wyeth could see these two doors as the Alvaro and Christina he remembered—the shadowy Alvaro, who posed for Wyeth only once and remained always in the background as Wyeth painted in the Olson house, and, by contrast, the brilliant, captivating Christina.

Room after Room, 1967

Watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

In what proved to be his last summer with the Olsons, Wyeth painted Christina obsessively, feeling that these might be their last weeks together. He made this watercolor in a moment when he glimpsed her in quiet thought—and glimpsed too the full extent of her interior world, each successive room.

Wood Stove, 1962

Watercolor and drybrush on paper

Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine

I wanted to make a record of the kitchen and of the two sides of the [Olson] house. This [the window at right] is facing the sea and here [at left] she is facing the land. I wanted a record of the wood stove and all the things that I

knew so well, her geraniums and so on. It was a document of the interior of the house. I was interested in the plate metal of the stove that gives off a hollow sound and feeling. This again goes back to my interest in metals and sounds, and the luster of metals, how they shine and don't shine. It's like all sorts of armor. . . . It was at that time that the house was deteriorating very quickly. Window panes were dropping out and there were terrific drafts in it.

— Andrew Wyeth

Thin Ice, 1969

Tempera with collage elements on panel

Private collection, Japan

We hover over a creek bed filled with dead leaves and covered with a thin layer of ice formed in an early winter cold snap. A dark shadow draws us in—it almost seems our own. We see the ice because of

air bubbles in the water below, and because Wyeth has cleverly painted one dead leaf in limbo, half of it resting on the surface. The painting was done a year after the deaths of Wyeth's friends Christina and Alvaro Olson in Maine. But Wyeth shows life within this frozen tomb. Christina Olson's memory would live on, and a new generative force was taking hold of Wyeth's imagination: the young, nubile Siri Erickson, his model now, was like life out of death, Wyeth said, when she came into his art in 1968, just as Christina Olson was passing away.

Indian Summer, 1970

Tempera on hardboard panel

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, Purchased for the Museum by John T. Dorrance, Jr.; Mr. and Mrs. Felix du Pont; Mr. and Mrs. James P. Mills; Mr. and Mrs. Bayard Sharp; two anonymous donors; and The Pew Memorial Trust, 1975

The Virgin, 1969

Tempera on hardboard panel

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, Purchased for the Museum by John T. Dorrance, Jr.; Mr. and Mrs. Felix du Pont; Mr. and Mrs. James P. Mills; Mr. and Mrs. Bayard Sharp; two anonymous donors; and The Pew Memorial Trust, 1975

If painstaking realism was associated with emotional detachment, Wyeth was determined to show that it could be otherwise. He dedicated himself to exploring the shock value of an erotic subject with his model Siri Erickson, beginning in 1968. Although the Siri nudes might seem like a sudden change of course for Wyeth, he thought they flowed naturally from the Christina Olson portraits, paintings that were shocking in another way for their discomfiting coarseness. Wyeth discovered Siri just as Christina was dying. Death as a controlling obsession was set aside now: "I've found something else that excites me," he said.

The Sauna, 1968

Tempera on hardboard panel

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, Purchased for the Museum by John T. Dorrance, Jr.; Mr. and Mrs. Felix du Pont; Mr. and Mrs. James P. Mills; Mr. and Mrs. Bayard Sharp; two anonymous donors; and The Pew Memorial Trust, 1975

Siri Erickson, whom Wyeth met in Maine in the fall of 1967, inspired his first nude in tempera, which he made the following summer. Painting her in her Finnish family's old sauna, Wyeth saw a logic in presenting her disrobed in that setting—and also a means of tempering any sense of unseemliness that others might find in painting her in such a provocative pose. This portrait signaled a loosening of whatever reserve had previously inhibited Wyeth's art. It was not exhibited publicly until 1973, when Wyeth felt that Siri had come of age.

Siri, 1970

Tempera on hardboard panel

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, Purchased for the Museum by John T. Dorrance, Jr.; Mr. and Mrs. Felix du Pont; Mr. and Mrs. James P. Mills; Mr. and Mrs. Bayard Sharp; two anonymous donors; and The Pew Memorial Trust, 1975

The Finn, 1969

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Collection of Shelly and Tony Malkin

To Wyeth, Siri's father had a kinship with Karl Kuerner, so Wyeth believed for many reasons that his discovery of the Ericksons in Maine was fated. George Erickson, Wyeth learned, was born the same day and year as Karl Kuerner, and Wyeth found him equally dark. The Ericksons lived in an old house not far from the Olsons in Cushing. They lived in a kind of primitive state, apart from the modern world,

having no indoor plumbing and few comforts. He wanted to dig deeper into the lives of the Ericksons, father and daughter.

Ericksons, 1973

Tempera on hardboard panel

Michael Altman Fine Art & Advisory Services, LLC,
New York

When Wyeth painted this portrait of George Erickson, Siri's father, in the kitchen of his old house, Wyeth was five years into his artist-and-model relationship with the girl who had drawn him to the primitive confines of the Erickson's place time and time again. Wyeth said he always thought about secrets that the aloof old Erickson kept and about secrets concealed behind the closed doors. At this time Wyeth was deep into his own consuming secret—he was making often-erotic studies of a Chadds Ford model, the married Helga Testorf, without the knowledge of his wife or of Testorf's husband.

Karl and Anna

Wyeth painted Karl Kuerner in 1947, and he painted the Kuerner farmhouse and barn in major temperas in the 1950s and '60s. But he did not take Karl and his wife, Anna, as subjects until 1971, when circumstances brought Wyeth inside the Kuerner house as never before. Karl was ill and dying of leukemia, and Anna had hired a helpmate, Helga Testorf. Wyeth first painted Helga in the Kuerners' upstairs rooms. Holed up in the house to draw and paint Helga, and sitting a long vigil over the sick and dying Karl, Wyeth studied the marriage of Karl and Anna up close.

Anna's forced exile from Germany to America after the Great War left her depressed: she tended to live wholly within herself, mumbling in German. She was detached from her husband yet performed her household duties selflessly, heroically—a tiny

woman withering away. Anna was usually unwilling to pose for Wyeth, but he watched her just the same. And in 1971, in one frozen moment, the elusive Anna Kuerner inspired what is arguably the most riveting image of a woman that Wyeth painted in the Helga years.

Karl's Room, 1954

Watercolor on paper

Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of Mrs. William Stamps Farish

Wyeth's watercolor *The Kuerners*, which hangs nearby, evolved over more than twenty-five years. The seeds of his characterization of Karl were sown in the first menacing tempera portrait he made of him in the upstairs bedroom and this later watercolor of Karl's room, where his rifle and animal heads were kept. Karl fascinated Wyeth as a killer. He had been a machine gunner in the German army in the First World War and murdered Americans. He was hardened by war and the fight for survival from season to season on the farm, and he could easily commit beastly things, like nonchalantly shooting and butchering deer and small animals.

Anna Kuerner, 1971

Watercolor on paper

Collection of Shelly and Tony Malkin

Anna Kuerner was elusive, a tiny woman who moved in and out of vision like a darting bird and spoke only German. She had never wanted to pose, but one day she surprised Wyeth by relenting. Over the next two weeks he made studies of her in watercolor, pencil, and tempera.

Home Comfort, 1976

Watercolor and pencil on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

I never consider these studies as drawings. All I'm doing is thinking with my pencil and brush. . . . There would have been a time when I would have made hundreds of close, methodical, even oddly dull drawings of an object when I was learning to catch a subject off balance.

And slowly, one learns to know anatomy, to know structure, proportion, perspective, when to modify, when not to, when to exaggerate, when to thin down. These are all things an artist should train himself to do so that at the right moment, the decisive moment, one is there to catch it, whether it's imaginary or graphically right there in front of you.

—Andrew Wyeth

Anna Climbing the Stairs, 1975

Watercolor and pencil on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

I noticed her going up this circular staircase on the second floor that goes up to the attic where I painted Karl with the iron hooks. . . . Over the years, I've been fascinated by things disappearing up that staircase. It seemed to me to say something about the ephemeral

nature of life itself. The first sketch I made of Anna Kuerner darting up the stairs was made from memory. I spent a month and a half just watching her disappear . . . I couldn't get her to pose, so I just sat there and waited.

—Andrew Wyeth

The Kuerners, 1971

Drybrush watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

By 1970, Wyeth was being drawn inside the Kuerner house, into an intimate relationship with the occupants. Now Wyeth studied Karl and Anna together—Karl given to drunken bouts of meanness, and Anna, deep in depression, living within herself and speaking only in German. This is Wyeth's portrait of their marriage. He had been struggling with a painting of Karl posing with his rifle when, one day, Anna walked up behind her husband,

flashing anger yet again at his indifference. “God, her expression when she looked at him with that gun by chance pointed right at her was incredible,” Wyeth said.

Wolf Moon, 1975

Watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

A January full moon, which farmers call a wolf moon, drew Wyeth out for the midnight ramble that produced this watercolor. In that light at that hour, the strangeness of the Kuerner farm was only heightened. Wyeth was surprised when he came upon it to hear the sound of what he knew had to be tiny Anna Kuerner chopping kindling inside the woodshed for the breakfast fire. “I stood there in the crisp, chill moonlight, entranced,” he said. Back in the studio, he painted this recollection of the light and sound—completing it in less than an hour, using “a great deal of luxurious black in order to make the

thing really shout” and leaving the unpainted white of the paper to impart the cold light. The painting embodies Wyeth’s thoughts, he said, of what was happening inside the house, unseen, as the frail but unstoppable Anna, now seventy-seven years old, worked heroically for her family and dying husband.

Evening at Kuerners, 1970

Watercolor on paper with drybrush

Collection of Nicholas Wyeth

“What I am doing now is so personal to me, it has nothing to do with Kuerners as a specific place anymore,” Wyeth would say in 1976. The painting Evening at Kuerners was not simply about a time of day, a quality of light, and a landscape. Initially, Wyeth sought to capture something of what he felt about the dying Karl Kuerner: the light in the ground-floor window was, to Wyeth, Kuerner’s flickering soul. But soon the painting came to be a repository of other sensations. Just looking at it,

Wyeth could enter at will his own private world, feeling “how the steps curve up to the attic, and the cool air that comes out of that door when you open it.” We now know that at the time he recalled this sensation he was painting Helga in that upstairs room in secret.

Spring Fed, 1967

Tempera on hardboard panel

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. W.D. Weiss

In 1967, Wyeth returned to a subject on Kuerner’s farm—nearly a decade after his previous temperas set there. This time he was thoroughly absorbed in one dank corner of the gray Kuerner world, the spring-fed sink in the barn:

One day I became conscious of the sound of running, trickling water—nature pouring itself out. The painting that emerged is about the

clang of the bucket, the crunch of hooves, the
spilling of water. My sister Carolyn said that the
basin looked like a sarcophagus. Yes. And that
shining bucket's the helmet of a knight who's in
that grave. Deep down, of course, the painting
is about farming. . . . It's about the brutality
and the delicacy of life on the farm symbolized
by that thin tin cup, that crooked faucet. . . .
I've drunk that water many times; it's the most
delicious water. The way it comes over the ledge
of the great trough and runs down the side is
timeless. It's like life itself, endlessly moving.

Slight Breeze, 1968

Tempera on hardboard panel

Private collection

The scene reminded me of my daughter-in-law
Phyllis on her crutches. The bell seemed to me
to be her wearing a characteristic big hat. It's

early spring. There are wild flowers. The wind is blowing around the corner. I love the way the light hit the white-painted bell and the building beside it.

— Andrew Wyeth

The German, 1975

Ink and drybrush watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Karl Kuerner was always the German army machine gunner in Wyeth's imagination, and he even dressed Kuerner up in his soldier's coat and helmet as an old man to play the part again. Wyeth once said that Kuerner's helmet alone spoke volumes about Karl's "whole background, his experience in the Black Forest" during the First World War.

Look closely at Wyeth's technique here. The painting was at first a detailed head study done in the studio. But to "unlock" some meaning deep within, to put Karl once again in the Black Forest, Wyeth spontaneously poured ink across the top of the sheet and let the dark drips flow down toward the head, manipulating them by moving the paper.

Untitled Study of Karl Kuerner with Rifle, 1964

Pencil on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Secrets and Lies

By 1970, Andrew Wyeth was living a double life. The public Wyeth, a beloved painter of the picturesque Kuerner farm and the Olsons in their weathered clapboard house, was a popular brand. His success was thanks in large part to his wife, Betsy, who promoted her husband's art by producing beautiful books and fine reproductions that put facsimiles of Wyeth's paintings in homes and college dormitories across the country.

The private Wyeth sought a freedom to paint without any intrusion from his wife or the demands of the marketplace. He painted Helga Testorf, a neighbor woman in Chadds Ford, in secret—even from Betsy—for thirteen years, producing a series of often erotic paintings of another man's wife. Wanting to shed artistic inhibitions, he jumped headlong into the themes of love and lust.

For Wyeth to keep his secret safe and not arouse Betsy's suspicions, he could not fall off in his output. He had to keep painting ambitious temperas as he always did. But these other paintings from the Helga years cannot be dismissed as obligatory mechanical exercises or toss-offs; there is nothing safe, predictable, or easy in the paintings Wyeth produced in tandem with the secret Helga pictures. Something about painting Helga, and something about its secrecy, expanded the psychological range of Wyeth's art.

Ides of March, 1974

Tempera on hardboard panel

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Frank E. Fowler

On the Roman calendar, the Ides of March correspond to March 15. Every schoolchild learns that on that day in 44 BC, Emperor Julius Caesar was stabbed to death by Roman senators. Given this title, it's hard not to see the antique iron fireplace implements, so prominent in the composition and so carefully rendered, as spears and an emperor's crown or diadem battered and hung up, its wearer dead and gone, his pyre or tomb protected by a loyal dog. Yet it's possible that the title was chosen by Betsy Wyeth to mark the date when the painting was completed. The picture shows Wyeth's dog lying on the hearth of the great cooking fireplace in the Wyeth's old mill home in Chadds Ford. The subject is likely something else entirely—"not the reality you see, but another kind," as filmmaker Ingmar Bergman put it.

Spring, 1978

Tempera on hardboard panel

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford,
Pennsylvania, Gift of George A. Weymouth and
his son in memory of Mr. and Mrs. George T.

Weymouth, 1987

Here is the artist's nightmarish vision of his dying friend. Kuerner's wasting body is as Wyeth imagined it, on ice, atop Kuerner's Hill, a landmark that haunted Wyeth forever after his father's death nearby.

In the months before Kuerner succumbed to leukemia, in January 1989, Wyeth regarded his friend in such a suspended state, his body lifeless but his mind active and his visions clear. The dying man once lapsed into a waking dream of the Great War that allowed Wyeth to peer into Kuerner's conscience. "Andy," Karl asked, with "a far-off look" in his eyes, "did you hear that snapping?" The sound in Kuerner's head was barbed wire being cut. He

had a story to tell of the trenches, of opening fire on a battalion of French soldiers he knew only as the sound of snapping in the dark. “God, I felt I was there on the western front sitting with him,” Wyeth said. “That story broke me loose of where I was.”

Braids, 1977

Tempera on hardboard panel

Private collection

“Remember, he’s a Bergman,” Betsy Wyeth once said of her husband. “He’s creating a world they [his models] don’t realize and they’re acting out a part without any script.” Each of Wyeth’s painted Helgas seems a different woman because each time she was fulfilling a different role. Wyeth said that Braids was an accurate portrayal of the thirty-eight-year-old Helga, something he thought he should get down for the record. And yet despite her realistic depiction, American art’s Mona Lisa remains inscrutable—ageless, at times a seemingly innocent

young girl, while at other times a provocative woman, at ease with the intimacy of having her face caressed by an obsessive, possessive artist.

Lovers, 1981

Drybrush watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

A dry leaf flies in on a chill wind—the window is open but beyond are barren winter trees. The cold outside has penetrated the dark room of sister Carolyn Wyeth’s painting studio, on the Wyeth homestead, where this watercolor and nearby Black Velvet were made. Perhaps because the secret of Wyeth and Helga was becoming seriously strained, he stilled this particular moment for all time. “There is motion in Rembrandt—his people turning toward the light,” he said of this painting, “But it’s frozen motion; time is holding its breath for an instant—and for eternity. That’s what I’m after.” Pretending it was a composite of several

young women he knew in Maine, an academic study of the nude, Wyeth gave the watercolor to his wife. But in titling it, Betsy recognized the intimacy on display here in the darkened room in daytime—she imagined, she said, the shadow on the wall being the woman’s lover.

Black Velvet, 1972

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Private collection

Here the sleeping Helga occupies a strange, incongruous place in an artist’s studio. Her meticulously rendered body now lives in the realm of art—the connection to Edouard Manet’s famous nude Olympia, with her black velvet ribbon choker, is often commented upon. Helga’s body floats as though on a dark sea. She glows by contrast. Wyeth’s precise drybrush watercolor technique forces us to stare. This is the equivalent of a filmmaker’s long, long static close-up that

arouses all the viewer's senses. His hyperrealism is obsessive, even possessive. Whatever the precise nature of the relationship he had with Helga, Wyeth shows us here that painting her was, in itself, an intimate act.

Snow Hill, 1989

Tempera on hardboard panel

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Now in his seventies, Wyeth looked back. In his imagination he brought together, in one festive place, many of the models, living and dead, from his famous Chadds Ford pictures: the late Karl Kuerner, in his soldier's coat and helmet; Karl's delicate wife, Anna, joyful as never before; the one-armed Bill Loper, dead now; Helga; Allan Lynch, a young suicide; and, just barely visible, the pig farmer Adam Johnson. The characters are from Wyeth's world, but the image is based on the unforgettable final scene in Ingmar Bergman's allegorical film

masterpiece, The Seventh Seal (1957), in which religious crusaders perform the dance of death as they are led to their graves. Wyeth used this painting similarly, to say goodbye to his characters. The dead N.C. Wyeth was always, for his son, one with the great mound that was Kuerner's Hill, so in a sense he is present here as well. The painter claimed that he, too, was in this picture, but where? One ribbon in this round dance has no apparent dancer. Is Andrew Wyeth the unseen dancer?

Little Africa, 1984

Drybrush watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Wyeth painted Little Africa as a rebellious act against his late father. The title refers to the old black settlement in Chadds Ford, largely gone by this time. He had painted Bill Loper and Adam Johnson there. Loper's steel arm hook represented an unforgettable moment of contention between the Wyeths—father and son, artist and teacher. In one of Andrew's earliest efforts, a painting of Bill Loper with his arm hook on full display, an angry N.C. Wyeth took it upon himself to rub out the menacing detail. He considered the hook unseemly, too real for art. N.C. Wyeth often voiced his disappointment in his son's deadpan realism. Too young and submissive to challenge his father's intrusion into the first Bill Loper painting, Andrew Wyeth finally settled the score decades later, with this defiant still life.

Big Top, 1981

Watercolor on paper with drybrush

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

I saw this wagon one night in the moonlight . . .

It's an authentic wagon of 1812, in which the

Du Pont company used to haul [gun] powder.

That wagon evoked vivid memories of circuses.

—Andrew Wyeth

Flint Study, 1975

Pencil on paper

Collection of Shelly and Tony Malkin

Things like rocks or boats could be metaphorical portraits or self-portraits in Wyeth's imagination. He might have likened the face of this weather-beaten flint rock on a Maine shore to the weathered Maine lobstermen and fishermen he knew, especially his close friend Walter Anderson.

Night Sleeper, 1979

Tempera on hardboard panel

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Wyeth's dog, Nell Gwyn, sleeps on a window seat in a place much like the old miller's house that Betsy had made into the Wyeths' home. Wyeth would say, only well after the fact, that the painting was an extension of his studies of Helga asleep. That the dog was named for the mistress of Charles II might have secretly amused the artist. But imagine the painting as Andrew and Betsy Wyeth must have when they titled it together in 1979: they referenced a train car passing silently through the Wyeth property at night, moving out of the Brandywine Valley en route to someplace far away. Betsy had been feeling her husband slip away, she acknowledged. Through the Helga years, Betsy said in retrospect, she felt "the close relationship vanished, ever so slowly. Vanished."

Nogeeshik Aquash, 1971

Pencil on paper

Frye Art Museum, Seattle

To me, pencil drawing is a very emotional, very quick, very abrupt medium. . . . I will perhaps put in a terrific black and press down on the pencil so strongly that perhaps the lead will break, in order to emphasize my emotional impact with the object. . . . Sometimes my hand, almost my fingertips, begin to shiver and this affects the quality of the lead pencil on the paper. It becomes dark and light, dark and light. The thing begins to move. The drawing begins to pull itself out of the blank piece of paper. You can't concoct that.

—Andrew Wyeth

Nogeeshik, 1972

Tempera on hardboard panel

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Nogeeshik Aquash was a wanderer. He was also an artist, and he knew well Andrew Wyeth's work and fame. An Ojibwa and active in the American Indian Movement, he traveled to the Wyeths' house in Chadds Ford to ask the artist for money to support a First Nations school. By identifying him here only by his first name, Wyeth conveys what was their fast and easy friendship. Wyeth let Nogeeshik live on his mill property for a while, until he left again to rejoin the movement. A year after Wyeth painted him, Nogeeshik was at the siege of Wounded Knee, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota, and he married the activist Anna Mae Aquash there. She would tragically become a martyr to the movement.

Adrift, 1982

Tempera on hardboard panel

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Wyeth explained that this is a portrait of his dearest friend, Walter Anderson, merely asleep in his dory. But what we see is a lifeless body reverently laid out in a coffin-like boat that is conspicuously without oars. The only logical explanation of the scene is death, perhaps the funeral of an ancient mariner at sea. The painting was a strange studio construct. But in the background Wyeth added white-crested combers breaking over a submerged ledge that was known to local fishermen as “the Brothers,” a deliberate and touching reference here, no doubt, to the closeness Wyeth felt to Anderson.

Pentecost, 1989

Tempera with pencil on hardboard panel

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Once on Allen Island [in Maine] in early morning light there were fishnets hung to dry—a whole feeling of shrouds—a fateful quality, eerie feeling of a phantom—the veil that Maid Marian wore. While I painted, I thought of a young girl . . . who fell in this roaring spout where the surf came in and out. It caught her and dragged her in. They couldn't save her, and she floated down past Allen Island to Pemaquid, and they picked up her body eight days later . . . still draped in a long skirt.

I kept thinking of that girl's body floating under water. The nets became her spirit. The nets were like fog. One was made of synthetic nylon and had a blueish cast. I tried doing it with a brush but couldn't get that fineness, that strange cold blue. So I went to a very sharp pencil, scoring into the gesso.

—Andrew Wyeth

Sparks, 2001

Tempera on hardboard panel

The National Arts Program, Malvern, Pennsylvania

A large candlestick looks like a medieval knight, a solemn, hooded sentinel at the door, which beckons us through the looking glass and beyond to a strange place that might be the gates of hell. Wyeth's mysterious watercolor Wolf Moon, at the upper right, is reversed here—is it painted as though it is reflected in a mirror, or does it signal that we have entered an alternative reality? The setting is a room in Wyeth's Chadds Ford home, an eighteenth-century stone miller's house on the Brandywine River, but the hearth is not welcoming. A sense of doom and death pervades the empty, unsettling scene.

Reflection

Wyeth disclosed the clandestine Helga paintings in 1986. But the ridicule in response to the sensationalized story—was she his model or his mistress?—and the controversial sale of the pictures for a staggering, record-setting price left him defensive about his art and unsure of his next move.

In 1987 Wyeth turned seventy, and in a state of reflection he began the large tempera Snow Hill, which conjures all the characters from the artist's Chadds Ford pictures, some living, most long dead, and brings them together in a festive Yuletide round dance atop Kuerner's Hill. Wyeth used the painting to say goodbye to these characters, to dance them off to their art-muse graves, and he would never enlist them again, even though he painted for another twenty years. Casting about for new subjects, Wyeth would symbolically reference his own advancing age and the quickening end to life.

Open Shutter (study for **My Studio**), 1974

Watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

For nearly seventy years Wyeth painted in this old schoolhouse on his father's property in Chadds Ford. The open shutter would seem to offer an enticing glimpse into Wyeth's carefully guarded privacy. It admits into the painting room a shaft of early spring light, unfiltered by the still-barren trees. If we think of the painting as a self-portrait, the half-open shutter is a sly wink offered by this elusive man.

British at Brandywine, 1962

Drybrush watercolor on paper

Private collection

The three paintings here are all deeply personal ruminations on the almost-sacred space of the artist's studio.

Wyeth's vast boyhood collection of toy soldiers was always in his studio. Here a few have come to life on a windowsill in the old mill building that Betsy Wyeth had renovated into a new home for the couple. The title—titles were almost always chosen by Betsy—refers to the momentous Revolutionary War battle where General George Washington's army was sent into retreat after a grueling eleven hours. The subtext for the painting is the real puzzle here, however. Might it have its genesis in the battles that ensued between Andrew and Betsy as she tried, against her husband's wishes, to relocate his studio away from what had been his father's property to the mill on the site of

battlefield? Wyeth stood his ground—he would always keep his studio on the old Wyeth homestead, in the same old schoolhouse that he had used since 1940.

North Light, 1984

Watercolor on paper

Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Wyeth

A great window fills the north side of N.C. Wyeth's grand painting studio. It speaks of the famous man's outsize character and ambition. The elder Wyeth had designed and built his Chadds Ford home and studio with money he received from his very first commission, in 1911, the celebrated illustrations for Treasure Island. Son Andrew grew up here and formally entered his father's studio as a student on October 19, 1932. After N.C. Wyeth was tragically killed by an oncoming train, on October 19, 1945, his children maintained the studio ever after as a

shrine. When Andrew Wyeth painted this symbolic “portrait” of his father, he was in a deeply reflective mood. The secret of painting Helga was now strained to breaking, and Wyeth’s art making and personal life would soon be upended.

Wheel Gate (study for **Me**), 2007

Watercolor on foamboard

Collection of Shelly and Tony Malkin

Ice plays with our perception here, and Wyeth’s manipulation of ink and paint makes it difficult to read the picture as anything but an abstraction. Try orienting yourself. The view is to the old wheel gate of the gristmill on Wyeth’s property on the Brandywine River in Chadds Ford. When the mill was in operation, the race water would rush, swift and powerful, through the open gate, through the mill, and then turn the huge wooden waterwheel inside.

Crow Tree (study for **Eagle Eye**), 2007

Watercolor on paper

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

In painting a dead tree, Wyeth depicted the ravages of time, possibly as a self-portrait done in Maine the summer of his ninetieth birthday. An eagle's aerie, the tall tree required a great expanse of paper, and this is one of the artist's very largest watercolors. There is something defiant in Wyeth's impressive artistic statement here—at ninety he is proudly upright and in full command of his artistic powers.

The Carry, 2003

Tempera on hardboard panel

Private collection

Painted when Wyeth was eighty-six years old, The Carry makes use of the time-honored symbolic associations that a river's torrent has with humankind's voyage of life. It's not a surprising subject for a painter meditating on the quickening end to his days. The torrent has been made more immediate, more powerful, by new painterly approaches to tempera painting that Wyeth had not considered when he was young. Tempera is very thinly applied here in places, like watercolor, and broadly brushed. The loose technique allowed Wyeth to paint more rapidly as he painted against time.

Airborne, 1996

Tempera on hardboard panel

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art,
Bentonville, Arkansas, Promised Gift

The setting is the Wyeth's house on their private Benner Island in Maine, which they purchased in 1990. Betsy had assembled a house from reclaimed buildings from both Maine and Chadds Ford, basing it on Henry Teel's old house on his ancestral Teel's Island, where Andrew and Betsy had often visited the aged lobsterman. Teel lives on here, specifically in the glass globe and lightning rod, which Wyeth had earlier painted on Teel's rooftop in 1950 in Northern Point (on view elsewhere in the exhibition), and a weathervane made from one of Teel's own oars. Benner Island was designed to evoke an earlier time in the Wyeths' lives. Into this immaculate, carefully staged world, however, chaos has been inserted in the flying feathers.

Goodbye, 2008

Tempera with pencil on hardboard panel

The Andrew and Betsy Wyeth Collection

Wyeth said goodbye to art and life with this painting—titled by Betsy Wyeth. He had just completed it in the autumn of 2008 when he suffered a fall that not long after would end his life. The scene is of an old sailloft that Betsy had reconstructed on one of the small Maine islands she had purchased and populated here and there with historic structures for her family's summertime use. The beautiful building had been her surprise Christmas present to her husband. Wyeth was deeply touched by his wife's gift, but he could not be confined there. A boat with a lone helmsman takes its leave, and a ghostly reflection of the building that was to be his studio and picture gallery disintegrates into the sea.