

## ANDREW WYETH

Andrew Wyeth is one of the most popular painters the United States has ever produced. He combines a realistic style with an element of abstraction. His paintings have been called 19th century realism, abstract realism, magic realism, and just plain realism. Wyeth himself called his style abstract. We know what the subject of the painting is, but the composition and use of colors are designed to create a particular mood. He uses some elements and omits others. Wyeth's favorite media were watercolor and egg tempera. He was not caught up in the art of the 1930s, in which regionalism or social comment played a part. His art is personalized-an expression of the people, the landscapes, and objects which have meaning for him. Such diverse things as a bucket of blueberries, old soldiers, a coat hung on a wall, walking boots, and interesting people all have appeared in his paintings. He liked to paint the landscape in winter and early spring when colors are subtle and trees are bare. The colors suit his tempera palette, low-key and subdued. In many paintings the space around the objects or people becomes an important element of the composition. Wyeth did not want people to look at his painting just to see how well he painted the fine details. He preferred that, through his paintings, people be reminded of memories of their own past or experience new feelings in the present. Not shallow nostalgia but depth of emotion was his goal.

Wyeth was influenced by the watercolors of Winslow Homer, and the work of Piero della Francesca (in the Italian Renaissance) and Albrecht Durer. Durer's greatest work, to Wyeth's thinking, is *The Large Piece of Turf*.

In making a watercolor, Wyeth would begin with splashes of color laid on in the background, and then added forms and careful detail with drybrush technique. Watercolor allowed him to get an idea for a painting down on paper quickly. He felt this lets him express the freer side of his nature. Then, with smaller brushes, he dipped into the paint, squeezed out excess paint, and separated the bristles to make a fan-like shape. As the brush moved on the paper, separate lines of paint in various widths were created. One of his first drybrush paintings was *Faraway*, a painting of his son Jamie when he was a child. The child wears a coonskin cap and is sitting on the grass. It was begun as a watercolor, with the drybrush technique used for the fur of the cap. Wyeth believed that Durer must have used drybrush in his watercolors.

In the 1940s Wyeth turned to tempera. He preferred egg tempera. He liked its dryness, its flatness, and the way it forced him to tighten up his technique. His most detailed, controlled paintings were done in egg tempera on panels which were first coated with gesso. In preparing the paint, dry pigments, which he often grinded himself, were mixed with egg yolk and then diluted with water. He used mineral pigments from all over the world, and liked using natural materials. He used low-key colors; some paintings are almost monochromatic. The quality of the tempera pleased him. Before beginning a picture, he often made a watercolor; the broad areas went on first, with the objects and details painted last. Egg tempera is a very tough surface. After drying for six months it can even be scrubbed.

Wyeth was born in 1917. He grew up as the youngest in a family of five children. His father, Newell Convers Wyeth, was a well-known illustrator. His best-remembered pictures are found in the series of children's books published by Charles Scribner's Sons. N.C. Wyeth loved fantasy and shared with the family not only that love, but also a love of music, poetry, and literature. Part of the time the older children were educated at home by tutors because N.C. did not believe in the structured teaching of the schools. He wanted his children to have the freedom to create art, music, and indeed whatever caught their interest. The holidays were especially exciting. For example, the painting studio was decorated with pumpkins, Indian corn, lanterns, and candles to make an autumn scene for the family Halloween parties. At Christmas, N.C. dressed as a Father Christmas figure. He climbed onto the roof of the house, stamped about with jingling bells, and then climbed down to distribute presents. He believed in becoming totally involved in whatever he did, and wanted his children to do the same. Taking his youngsters on hikes across the countryside around Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, where they lived, he urged them to really see their surroundings. He wanted them to see the colors, shadows, and textures, hear the sounds, and smell what they saw. Even the fury of thunderstorms, wind, and blizzards were seen as high drama and excitement.

Though the older children had the experience of going to school, Andrew did not. His health was poor. He was educated entirely at home. He did not have a formal instruction in drawing and painting until he was fifteen, although he had been doing both on his own since childhood. He had made his first pen and ink drawings when he was about ten, drawing the islands in Maine where the family vacationed. At about this time he began using watercolors. He was allowed the freedom of using the media and methods that appealed to him.

Andrew's formal training began, with his father as his only teacher. At first it was hard to accept the discipline. His first drawing task was to draw an old flintlock pirate pistol. His father had chosen something that would catch Andrew's interest. He drew it over and over, first in one position, then another, for five months. It did not take long for him to become intensely interested in the task. The next project was making drawings of cubes and a sphere. Following that, he painted in oil from a still life of apples on draped cloth. Next he made paintings of a copy of Beethoven's death mask; then a large cutlass against drapery. His father taught without pressure, helping him to make steady progress. By the time Andrew was eighteen some of his watercolors were taken by a New York art dealer and sold in his gallery. Andrew knew he needed more knowledge and experience. His father helped him study anatomy, beginning with drawings of the skeleton. Then he hired local people to model for his drawings. His father seemed to know when to help his son move on to the next phase of his training. Andrew learned to really "get inside" the object or person he was painting.

By the early 1940s Wyeth had to make the decision whether to become an illustrator, like his father, or to continue as a painter in the fine arts sense. Some of his pen drawings had been published as illustrations when he was only twelve. In 1943 other work had been sold as illustrations. Wyeth had married Betsy James in 1940. She too, wanted him to

stay with painting. She was a valuable asset to Wyeth during their life together. She arranged their schedule to allow him the time he needed to be alone to paint, take walks and gather ideas for his paintings.

The death of N.C. Wyeth in an accident in 1945 grieved Andrew profoundly. His relationship with his father had been deeper and more intense than what most sons and fathers experience. N.C. had been father, teacher and friend. Andrew believed that the turning point in his career came after his father's death. He wanted to use all his father had taught him to become all he could as an artist. His first tempera painting done after this was *Winter*, 1946, a picture of a boy running down a bare hill in winter. Behind that hill is the railroad track on which his father's car had been struck. Other paintings made during that decade reflect both the gloom of that wartime period and the emotional stress Wyeth felt.

The artist spent his year between Chadds Ford and Cushing, Maine. As he grew up, his family had also lived in those areas. Wyeth and his wife restored the buildings of an old grain mill in Chadds Ford and lived in the miller's house. The legend built up around Wyeth portrays him as a solitary painter who painted the countryside and seldom left it. It is true that he spent much of his time at home, but he certainly was part of the modern world. He valued solitude for his work. This included rambling about the countryside, developing ideas for his paintings. He had a lively imagination. On long walks he liked to think about what his environment was like long ago – who lived there and how – the kind of personal involvement his father had encouraged in his children on other long walks. To strangers Wyeth may have appeared to be shy and reserved. To those who knew him better, he was outgoing and congenial. When he painted he hated to have someone watching or talking to him. He liked to become absorbed in his work without being distracted.

Some of Wyeth's best known works have involved two families and their farms. In Chadds Ford, Karl and Anna Kuerner live close to the Wyeths. As a boy Wyeth used to visit them to talk to Karl about his experiences in World War I as a German soldier. The Kuerner house, farm buildings, and animals (and the Kuerners themselves) were often subjects of Wyeth paintings. Among these are *Lamplight*, *Brown Swiss*, *Spring Fed*, *Groundhog Day*, *Karl*, *Anna Kuerner*, *The Kuerners*, and *The German*. The painting *Karl* is the one Wyeth considered the best. The man is seated in the third floor of his house. Above him are hooks on which sausages were hung in the winter. A landscape of wide open space and hills called *Snow Flurries* is also from the Kuerner series.

Painting of the Olsons and their seaside farm and buildings probably came about because Betsy Wyeth had known the Olsons since she was a little girl. She introduced Wyeth to them shortly after she and Andrew met in Cushing, Maine. Christina and Alvaro were sister and brother. Alvaro had been a fisherman until his sister's health had made it impossible for her to be left alone on the farm for long periods. She had been crippled by polio when she was a child. Wyeth came to spend much time at their house, talking, sketching, and painting. An upstairs room was turned into a place for him to work. One of his best-known paintings from the Olson group is *Christina's World*, done in 1948. Her

world was a small one, limited to the house and grounds around it. Other paintings include *Anna Christina*, *Miss Olson and a Kitten*, *Christina Olson*, and *Oil Lamp*, in which Alvaro sits beside a lamp – the only painting of Alvaro. Pictures of the house and farm include *Wind from the Sea*, *Breakfast at Olsons'*, *Weather Side*, and, the final painting, *End of Olsons*.

Wyeth's works are not, of course, limited to the models mentioned above. He has painted other people in Cushing as well as Chadds Ford. The sea and the countryside provide continually changing subject matter. While realism in painting gained in popularity and acceptance in the 1980s, Wyeth's work shows greater depth of feeling than is often found in the photo-realism styles of that time period.