

The New Criterion

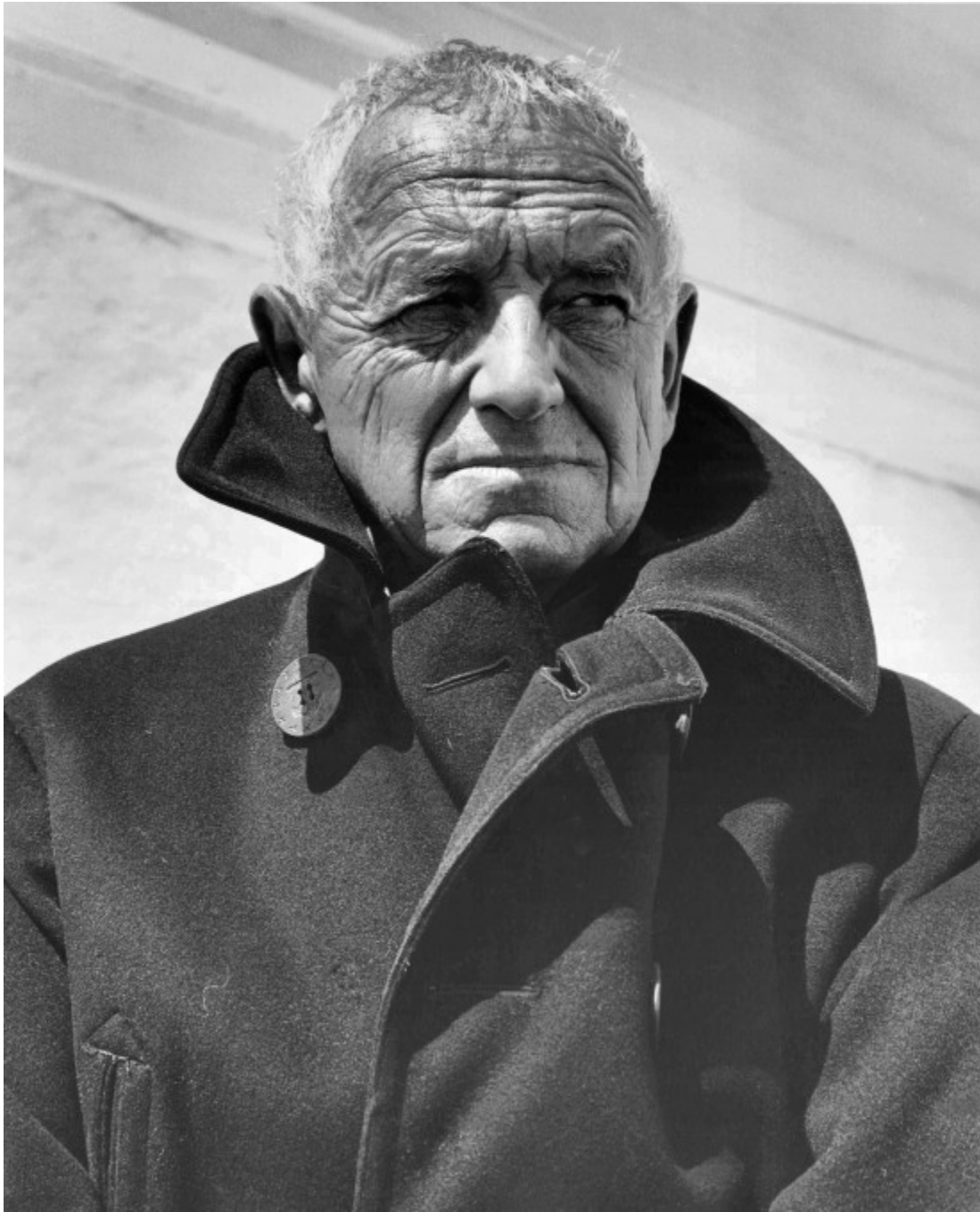
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Andrew Wyeth forever

by *James Panero*

On the career of Andrew Wyeth and the traveling exhibition, "Andrew Wyeth: In Retrospect."

Andrew Wyeth was born a century ago this year. To mark the centennial, the United States Postal Service issued a series of stamps and keepsakes, with a launch ceremony last July in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, the place of Wyeth's birth and, along with Cushing, Maine, a lifelong focus of his art. With a selvage that includes a photograph of the young artist in his Chadds Ford studio from the 1930s, the \$5.88 sheet features a pane of "twelve Andrew Wyeth Forever® stamps" that reproduce Wyeth's paintings of rural and coastal life in a five-inch adhesive grid. Here in miniature are the billowing curtains of *Wind from the Sea* (1947), the milk-cooling bath of *Spring Fed* (1967), the old schoolhouse that became *My Studio* (1974), the *North Light* (1984) of the next-door studio of his famous father, the illustrator *Newell Convers (N. C.) Wyeth*, and various interiors and exteriors of hardscrabble rusticity—*Big Room* (1988), *Alvaro and Christina* (1968), *Frostbitten* (1962), *Soaring* (1942–1950), and *Young Bull* (1960). Also included is a stamp of Wyeth's most well-known painting, *Christina's World* (1948)—acquired by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. fresh from a gallery wall in 1949, it became Wyeth's only work to enter the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, where it remains today on extended if unceremonious view.



Andrew Wyeth in 1983. Photo: Bruce Weber / Agence France-Presse—Getty Images

The issuing of commemorative stamps is an honor that has been bestowed on other twentieth-century painters, of course, but the occasion might seem all too fitting for Andrew Wyeth, an artist who posted a popular alternative to the onrush of modernity with what many considered to be the timeless correspondence of rural American life. Widely reproduced thanks to the commercial savvy of his wife, Betsy, Wyeth's paintings have endlessly circulated in a way that has long enthralled the public—who have flocked to his exhibitions and collected his posters—and infuriated his critics—who have regarded his philatelic reputation as a postage-sized legacy.

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“An image of American life—pastoral, innocent, and homespun—which bears about as much relation to reality as a Neiman Marcus boutique bears to the life of the old frontier,” is how my late colleague Hilton Kramer saw Wyeth in 1970, at the time of a retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, that broke records for attendance. Six years later came the Metropolitan’s own blockbuster “Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth: Kuerners and Olsons,” organized by Thomas Hoving, the museum’s director, after his curators passed on the exhibition. Remarking on Wyeth’s “monochrome vision of the world,” here Hilton wondered “if there is not in this art a hidden scatological obsession. How else can one account for the excremental quality of this palette, which censors out anything that might complicate its ‘earthy’ view of nature and human experience?”

Beyond false realism, a near unanimity of critics has accused Wyeth of trafficking, it might be said, in a false consciousness of American life. Wyeth’s images of “frugal, bare-bones rectitude” may be “incarnated in real objects” wrote Robert Hughes in the *New York Review of Books*, but they have been “glazed by nostalgia . . . which millions of people look back upon as the lost marrow of American history.” A “kitsch-meister” of “dreary vignettes” that “celebrate . . . cultural and social immobility” (Robert Storr), Wyeth painted “formulaic stuff not very effective even as illustrational ‘realism’ ” (Peter Schjeldahl) in a palette of “mud and baby poop” (Dave Hickey). “Not a great artist.” “The press noted when he voted for Nixon and Reagan” (Michael Kimmelman).

Indeed, it does not take long to sense something false, even sinister, in Wyeth’s most famous painting, *Christina’s World*—so long as you can find the work hanging in the Museum of Modern Art. Following its acquisition, the anti-modernity of this vastly popular image, a standard dorm-room appurtenance for a generation of liberal-arts majors, has long been a bugaboo for the museum’s curatorial staff, who excommunicated the painting from the collection halls to the museum’s utility spaces.



Andrew Wyeth, Christina's World, 1948, Tempera on panel, The Museum of Modern Art.

Wyeth's painting of a woman crawling up a weedy hill towards a forlorn house has itself moved up, from hanging outside one moma restroom to another. *Christina's World* is these days found surrounded by a constellation of information desks, elevator banks, escalators, and baby-changing areas. Yet the public still seeks it out, for its celebrity as well as its strangeness—lingering, as I observed, over the painting's details long after taking the requisite photograph.

Christina's World presents several mysteries. The first is any sense of how it could have been created with such exacting detail. Tempera, Wyeth's medium of choice, is an ancient and challenging concoction of egg yolk and mineral pigment. From Roman times until the sixteenth century, egg tempera was the primary medium of painting. The advent of oil then brought about a more flexible and forgiving medium that allowed for the use of lightweight canvas instead of heavy and stiff wooden panels. N. C. Wyeth, Andrew's father and teacher, was an oil painter. Peter Hurd, an apprentice to N. C. who became Andrew's brother-in-law, introduced tempera to Andrew as an antiquarian curiosity in the 1930s. In 1938, the two attended a demonstration of tempera painting in the Early Renaissance manner given by Daniel V. Thompson at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Wyeth went on to study Old Master paintings in the museum collection, especially information-packed compositions in the style of Pieter Bruegel I, the Flemish artist who painted in both tempera and oil.

Fast drying, tempera also allows for far greater detail than oil. Much like drawing in paint, one thin line at a time, tempera permitted Wyeth to deploy his full talents for draftsmanship—inherited from his father—to his final compositions. Tempera also distinguished Andrew's body of work from the more expected look and faster pace of the paintings of N. C., who created illustrations on commission for such books as *Treasure Island*. Whereas N. C. once dismissed his apprentice son's experiments in

the medium, it was the alchemic deployment of tempera that came to define the unreality of Andrew's slowly produced final compositions, such as *Christina's World*. He even found a favorite egg, the Extra Large from the local Wawa convenience store, which he used for its yolks while feeding the whites to his dogs.

Christina's World purports to display a far greater degree of information than a painting should possibly contain. Every dried blade of grass, on up to the ridgeline, seems to be present and accounted for. The same goes for the warped clapboard siding and stained roof shingles of the minutely detailed buildings, cutting into the horizon line with uninterrupted drama, far up along the crest of the hill.

For all of its detail, *Christina's World* communicates only the most elusive of narratives.

Yet, for all of its detail, the painting communicates only the most elusive of narratives. Who is Christina? What is "her world"? What accounts for her oversized, talon-like hands tearing at the dirt, or her thin, chicken-like arms holding her up? With her face turned away, what does she even look like? Why is she on the ground at all, tense and twisted against our view? What of the house's treeless desolation, the sorry ladder leading up to its roof, the tattered clothing on the line, the murder of crows flying out of the hayloft, the tire tracks unaccountably cutting through the field, or just the general, sepia-toned sense of disrepair? And what are we, as viewers, meant to make of our own role in surveying this captivatingly maudlin scene?



The view today of Kuerner's Hill from Kuerner Farm. Photo: James Panero

Hilton was right to conclude that Wyeth “offers the world a dream that it cherishes—a pastoral alternative to what both art and life normally afford—and the world will beat a path to the door of whatever institution makes it available.” A recent blockbuster exhibition in Chadds Ford at the Brandywine River Museum of Art, “Andrew Wyeth: In Retrospect,” for the first time allowed the close comparison of a large selection of Wyeth’s body of work with the very places that informed his working—his own studio and the studio of his father, along with “Little Africa” and Kuerner Farm, the home of his portrait subjects Karl and Anna Kuerner and the workplace of Helga Testorf. ¹ Only recently entering the public trust, and now administered by the Brandywine Conservancy, these sites and the history that surrounds them illuminate the dreamy brand of realism that Wyeth so expertly, if excruciatingly, captured.

As this exhibition now travels on to the Seattle Art Museum, the Brandywine’s partner institution, such comparisons must be made over longer distances, but they remain equally compelling. For what becomes apparent, walking the same back roads that Wyeth walked for some nine decades (he died in 2009 at the age of ninety-one), is how vastly circumscribed his version of “realism” truly must have been, especially in his seemingly hyper-realistic tempera on panel. Despite all of the details they include, compared to on-the-ground reality, Wyeth’s compositions are most significant for what they leave out, with restrictive editing that imbued his minimal and even abstract paintings with a desolate aura.

This is certainly true for Christina’s World (which did not travel for the show and remains at moma).

The coastal Maine property indeed exists, and an infirm Anna Christina Olson did live there. In 1989 the fourteen-room colonial was put up for sale by then-Apple ceo John Sculley for \$1.25 million. It was eventually donated to the Farnsworth Art Museum. But the reality of Wyeth's scene ends there. The model for the painting was in fact Wyeth's able-bodied wife, Betsy. Her shoes were costume props. The trees obscuring the ridgeline were stripped away, while the depth of field of the hillside was greatly extended. And the painting's palette was thoroughly scrubbed of its blues, as in a photographic process.

Take another famous Wyeth hill, *Winter 1946* (1946), this one in the current exhibition: Same tawny colors. Same sharp ridgeline and depth of field. Same mysterious figure in the foreground—this time, a boy twirling down. Even the same tire tracks cutting through the grass. The actual location Wyeth depicted here is Kuerner's Hill, across from Kuerner Farm. But the reality of its shapes and colors is unrecognizable when compared to the painting—despite, again, Wyeth's persistence of supposed detail.



Still from King Vidor's The Big Parade. Photo: Jeff Rapsis

The most compelling aspect of “Andrew Wyeth: In Retrospect,” as explored in a catalogue essay by the art historian Henry Adams, is the artist's fascination with American movie-making. In particular, this meant silent movies, and, specifically, the 1925 blockbuster *The Big Parade*, about three American GIs of differing backgrounds sent to the Western Front in World War I. Later in life, Wyeth reached out to King Vidor, the film's forgotten creator, with a mash note and invitation to visit:

I consider your war film *The Big Parade* the only truly great film ever produced. Over the years I have viewed the film many, many times and with each showing the certainty of its greatness deepens. I have always viewed it with awe and I must tell you that in many abstract ways it has influenced my paintings.

Wyeth wasn't kidding about his interest in this movie. At the time of Vidor's visit in 1975, Wyeth had watched *The Big Parade* some 180 times. By his death some thirty years later, the number of showings, according to Adams, had reached 500. Adventure films in general were of interest to Wyeth. When I recently toured his preserved studio, the canistered reels for *Captain Blood* were still on the bookshelf. But Vidor's cinematic innovations were Wyeth's great artistic inheritance: the perspective lines reaching to an unobstructed horizon, the feeling for scarred battlefield landscapes, and the use of visual symbols such as shoes to signify meaning. Much like Wyeth's own foreshortening of narrative, Vidor himself imagined a cinema of the future "without a story. By that I mean a production in which the main interest will center about the atmosphere and background rather than in the acting or the plot."

Wyeth manipulated his compositions much like a silent film director.

Wyeth manipulated his compositions much like a silent film director. His captions were his allusive titles. He used real people and real places but cast them in his own scouted locations, working extensively through preparatory drawings and watercolors to distill the vision in tempera. In his lack of authenticity and his chilly sentiment, Wyeth was decidedly unmodern. His artifice might be considered postmodern, even contemporary, as he processed the idioms of one medium through the materials of another, pressing it all together in the dying light of illustration and the lingering moods of Symbolism and the American Gothic.

At the same time, the approach was far from superficial for Wyeth. His compositions largely emerged from personal, psycho-cinematic places. His figures and locations all conveyed a personal if sublimated feeling. For example, Wyeth first met the Olsons later on the same day he had met his wife—a psychological metonymy that helps explain why Betsy could serve as the model for *Christina's World*. That same Cushing hill meant so much to Wyeth that he was buried in the Olson family plot at the location of the painting's point of view (Wyeth had once observed Christina Olson delivering flowers to the same cemetery, a scene that inspired the painting and the figure's dusty hands).

An even deeper sense of connection runs through Chadds Ford, and in particular the Kuerner Farm. In 1945, N. C. Wyeth and his three-year-old grandson and namesake— Andrew’s nephew—were struck and killed at a railroad crossing by an unscheduled mail train that ran on a track along the edge of the Kuerner property. The farm overlooks the site of the crash, while the hill obscures it. The impact was so catastrophic that N. C. was compacted in his vehicle, while the toddler was thrown from the car, dying when his neck snapped against an embankment. Allan Lynch, the boy Wyeth went on to depict in *Winter 1946*, is the one who first came upon the wreckage and kept the wild dogs from lapping up the blood.



*Andrew Wyeth, Winter 1946, 1946, Tempera on panel, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC
. Photo: Andrew Wyeth / Artists Rights Society*

The gruesome battle scenes of *The Big Parade*, which Wyeth first saw with his father in a Wilmington theater when he was eight, became the filter for this family tragedy. Wyeth depicted Karl Kuerner, who was a German machine gunner in the war, as his paintings’ menacing antagonist, often in full trench uniform. Meanwhile Wyeth himself might be seen as the movie’s upper-crust hero, Jim Apperson, a dandy figure despised by his father, but one who finds a cause fighting alongside his central-casting working-class friends: Slim, a construction worker; and Bull, a bartender.

Much like Jim Apperson in his war, Andrew Wyeth in his art was a coastal elite who romanticized but also valorized the struggles of the overlooked and the flown-over. His circle of collectors and friends included the Du Ponts, whose Gilded Age estates, including Winterthur and Longwood Gardens, surround Chadds Ford. Driven by personal struggle and a captivating fetish for the downtrodden, Wyeth painted out his own Hollywood redemption plot. His art was his artifice. Much like his extensive collection of toy soldiers, which still populate his studio shelves, his subjects were stand-ins. His sense for the magic of the movies may not have derived from a high-modernist manifesto.

Nevertheless through his astonishing technique he managed to illustrate a personal story that has resonated with generations. If not empathetic, his compelling images still offer up a voyeuristic escape, all with the timeless stamp of inauthenticity.

1 “Andrew Wyeth: In Retrospect” opened at the Seattle Art Museum on October 19, 2017 and remains on view through January 15, 2018. The exhibition was previously on view at the Brandywine River Museum of Art, Chadds Ford (June 24–September 17, 2017).

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