

**Andrew Wyeth, Painter, Dies at 91**

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN Published: January 16, 2009

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[Andrew Wyeth](#), one of the most popular artists in the history of American art, a reclusive linchpin in a colorful family dynasty of artists whose precise realist views of hardscrabble rural life became icons of national culture and sparked endless debates about the nature of modern art, died Friday at his home in Chadds Ford, PA. He was 91.



Museum of Modern Art  
"Christina's World," 1948,  
by Andrew Wyeth. [More Photos »](#)

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Sara Krulwich/The New York Times  
Andrew Wyeth in Chadds Ford,  
Pa., 1997. [More Photos >](#)

He died in his sleep, said Hillary Holland, a spokeswoman for the Brandywine River Museum, The Associated Press reported. Wyeth gave America a prim and flinty view of Puritan rectitude, starchily sentimental, through parched gray and brown pictures of spooky frame houses, desiccated fields, deserted beaches, circling buzzards and craggy-faced New Englanders.

A virtual Rorschach test for American culture during the better part of the last century, Wyeth split public opinion as vigorously as, and probably even more so than, any other American painter including the other modern Andy, Warhol, whose milieu was as urban as Wyeth's was rural.

Because of his popularity, a bad sign to many art world insiders, Wyeth came to represent middle-class values and ideals that modernism claimed to reject, so that arguments about his work extended beyond painting to societal splits along class, geographical and educational lines. One art historian, in response to a 1977 survey in Art News magazine about the most underrated and overrated artists of the century, nominated Wyeth for both categories.

Art critics mostly heaped abuse on his work, saying he gave realism a bad name. Supporters said he spoke to the silent majority who jammed his exhibitions. "In today's scrambled-egg school of art, Wyeth stands out as a wild-eyed radical," one journalist wrote in 1963, speaking for the masses. "For the people he paints wear their noses in the usual place, and the weathered barns and bare-limbed trees in his starkly simple landscapes are more real than reality."

[John Updike](#) took up the same cause 25 years later: "In the heyday of Abstract Expressionism, the scorn was simple gallery politics; but resistance to Wyeth remains curiously stiff in an art world that has no trouble making room for Photorealists like Richard Estes and Philip Pearlstein and graduates of commercial art like Wayne Thiebaud, [Andy Warhol](#), and for that matter, [Edward Hopper](#)."

A minority opinion within the art world always tried to reconcile Wyeth with mainstream modernism. It was occasionally argued, among other things, that his work had an abstract component and was linked to the gestural style of artists like Kline, de Kooning and Pollock, for whom Wyeth expressed general disdain. It is true that especially some of the early watercolors of the 30's and 40's, in a looser style, inclined toward abstraction.

Contrary to what detractors and some supporters said, his style vacillated over the years, which suited neither those who wanted to say he stayed in a rut his whole career nor those who championed him as a model, as one art historian put it, "of continuity and permanence in the face of instabilities and uncertainties of modern life."

Wyeth remained a polarizing figure even as the traditional 20th century distinction between abstraction and avant-gardism on the one hand and realism and conservatism on the other came to seem woefully inadequate and false. The only indisputable truth was that his art existed within a diverse American context that encompassed illustrators like his father, N.C. Wyeth and [Norman Rockwell](#), and also landscape painters like John Marin, [Winslow Homer](#), Albert Bierstadt and Fitz Hugh Lane.

One picture encapsulated his fame. "Christina's World" became an American icon like Grant Wood's "American Gothic," or Whistler's portrait of his mother or Emmanuel Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware." Wyeth said he thought the work was "a complete flat tire" when he originally sent it off to the Macbeth Gallery in Manhattan in 1948. The Museum of Modern Art bought it for \$1,800.

Wyeth had seen Christina Olson, crippled from the waist down, dragging herself across a Maine field, "like a crab on a New England shore," he recalled. To him she was a model of dignity who refused to use a wheelchair and preferred to live in squalor rather than be beholden to anyone. It was dignity of a particularly dour, hardened, misanthropic sort, to which Wyeth throughout his career seemed to gravitate. Olson is shown in the picture from the back. She was 55 at the time. (She died 20 years later, having become a frequent subject in his art; her death made the national news thanks to Wyeth's popularity.)

It is impossible to tell her age in the painting or what she looks like, the ambiguity adding to the overall mystery. So does the house, which Wyeth called a dry-bone skeleton of a building, a symbol during the Depression of the American pastoral dream in a minor key, the house's whitewash of paint long gone, its shingles warped, the place isolated against a blank sky.

As popular paintings go, "Christina's World" is remarkable for being so dark and humorless, yet the public seemed to focus less on its gothic and morose quality and more on the way Wyeth painted each blade of grass, a mechanical and unremarkable kind of realism that was distinctive if only for going against the rising tide of abstraction in America in the late 1940's.

"Oftentimes people will like a picture I paint because it's maybe the sun hitting on the side of a window and they can enjoy it purely for itself," Wyeth once said. "It reminds them of some afternoon. But for me, behind that picture could be a night of moonlight when I've been in some house in Maine, a night of some terrible tension, or I had this strange mood. Maybe it was Halloween. It's all there, hiding behind the realistic side."

He also said: "I think the great weakness in most of my work is subject matter. There's too much of it."

Nonetheless, the perception of Wyeth's art as an alternative to abstraction accounted for a good portion of its enduring popularity during the mid-years of the last century. Added to this was his personality: self-theatricalizing (his biographer, Richard Meryman, described him as a "self-promoter" and a "closet showman"), Wyeth was not a bohemian, or at least he behaved contrary to the cliché of the bohemian artist.

He was also a vocal patriot, which endeared him to some quarters during the Cold War and dovetailed with a general sense that his art evoked a mythic rural past embedded in the American psyche. "America's absolutely it," he once said.

Never mind that he painted mostly bleak portraits of a barren country: he stayed in the public imagination for nostalgic paintings like "Young America," from 1950, of a boy cycling across a plain, which Wyeth in an interview in Time magazine related to "the plains of the Little Bighorn and Custer and Daniel Boone and a lot of other things."

In later years, the press noted when he voted for Nixon and Reagan, not because he was an outspoken partisan in his political views but because he differed in those views from other artists who were very outspoken at the time. Bucking the liberal art establishment, and making a fortune in the process, allowed him to play familiar American roles: antiestablishmentarian and free-thinking individualist who at the same time represented the vox populi.

A favorite saying of his was: "What you have to do is break all the rules." And as bohemianism itself became institutionalized, Wyeth encapsulated the artistic conservatives' paradoxical idea of cultural disobedience through traditional behavior.

Wyeth's admirers made a point of tracing his roots deep into the American past, to Nicholas Wyeth, who emigrated from England to Cambridge, Mass., in 1645. Wyeths died fighting in the French and Indian War. Andrew Newell Wyeth III was born on July 12, 1917, in Chadds Ford, Penn., the fifth child of Carolyn and Newell Convers Wyeth, the great illustrator.

Famous for his blood-and-thunder magazine illustrations, posters, advertisements and illustrations for "Treasure Island," "Robin Hood," "The Last of the Mohicans" and "Robinson Crusoe," which sold in the millions of copies, N.C. Wyeth became a role model, teacher and inevitable point of comparison in Andrew's pursuit of his own career as an artist. The situation repeated itself a generation later when Jamie followed his father Andrew as an artist.

N.C. was a big man with tremendous energy, a kindly tyrant as a father, according to his children, who also remembered him for his flash temper. He created a hothouse environment in which Andrew, a frail boy who came down with one after another illness, was taught at home. His life was both sheltered and obsessively focused. He learned to be a proficient draftsman before he learned to read well. By his teens, he was doing illustrations under his father's name. Nevertheless, he resisted the goal that his father had for him of becoming an illustrator.

"Pa kept me almost in a jail," Wyeth recalled, "just kept me to himself in my own world, and he wouldn't let anyone in on it. I was almost made to stay in Sherwood Forest with Maid Marion and the rebels."

By the 1920's, N.C. Wyeth had become a huge celebrity visited by other celebrities like F. Scott Fitzgerald and

Mary Pickford. The insularity, the familial competition, the theatrical personalities in and around the house, the atmosphere of commercial success and popular fame with its taint of artistic compromise — the presumption that realistic representation was intrinsically a virtue: all these factors shaped Andrew Wyeth's life & evolution.

While he admired his father's intensity, which he hoped to match, his imagery differed from his father's. N.C.'s work was full of action and drama. Andrew's work often had no people in it. He painted snowy landscapes under leaden skies, a barn with a door ajar, an abandoned house, tire tracks, a wedding tent in an empty field, fishermen's nets hung to dry in the breeze: images of absence, silence, loss, abandonment, desolation but also expectation. One of his famous paintings was a God's eye view of soaring turkey buzzards. Another showed an empty dory on a beach with a swallow swooping past.

He liked the idea that figures might be implicit in the image. He suggested that "Christina's World" might have been better had he "painted just that field and have you sense Christina without her being there." Occasionally, as when he painted Christina head-on, he turned her face into a kind of landscape, the weathered features being a topography.

His subjects were family, friends and his immediate surroundings in Pennsylvania and in Maine, the reflections of the circumscribed existence he chose for himself. Repeatedly he painted, besides Christina, his friend Walt Anderson; Ben Loper, a black handyman, who posed for "A Crow Flew By," and Karl and Anna Kuerner, neighbors whose farm became a counterpoint to the Olson's place in Maine. Karl was an avid hunter and a former German machine-gunner in World War I who died in 1979, at 80. There were rumors that he was a Nazi sympathizer, which drove Wyeth during World War II to search the Kuerner house for a wireless spy transmitter.

Wyeth said he was intrigued by the combination of cozy domesticity at the Kuerners' and the knowledge that Karl had gunned down soldiers. One portrait of Karl shows him cradling a rifle. It was done in a room at the house with a moose rack on the wall. Wyeth recalled that while he was painting Anna walked into the room to summon her husband to dinner, the barrel pointing directly at her. He quickly rubbed out the antlers and painted her in. Wyeth's wife later titled it "America's Sweethearts."

Wyeth described several other portraits of Karl as surrogate portraits of N.C., whom he had never painted. His father died in 1945 with a grandson, Newell, the four-year-old son of N.C.'s son Nathaniel and daughter-in-law Caroline, when their car stalled on a railroad crossing. It was struck by a train, an event that Wyeth linked to such melancholic and metaphoric pictures as "Winter," of 1945. "The German," a portrait of Kuerner in a helmet, was painted in 1975 when he was dying of cancer. Wyeth said he was painting cold eyes "that have looked down a machine-gun barrel, squinted great distances," adding, "those are my father's lips — cruel."

The young Wyeth's hero, after his father, was Winslow Homer. He saw Homer's watercolors in the early 1930's. At the time he was painting laborers and landscapes in ways that related to American scene painters like Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry but increasingly he emulated Homer's impressionistic watercolors. He moved to Maine, made a pilgrimage to Homer's studio at Prout's Neck, and the vigorous, shimmering watercolors he began to paint aspired to Homer's fleeting effects of light and movement.

He first showed them at the Art Alliance of Philadelphia in 1936. His father picked the works for him. The next year, through an associate of his father's, the Macbeth Gallery in New York gave him his first one-man show, which sold out at the opening. Wyeth made \$500. At the same time he began to work in egg tempera, a technique that appealed to his fastidious, traditional and tight-lipped side, with its dry, chalky, ghostly effects. His father was skeptical about the medium, but Wyeth was encouraged to pursue it by a strong-willed 17-year-old woman he met in 1939 in Maine.

Betsy James grew up picking nasturtiums from Christina Olson's garden and playing in the Olson's ice-house. On meeting Wyeth she took him immediately to see the Olson house. "I wanted to see if he would go in," she recounted. "A lot of people wouldn't — the smell, the odor — and this was a summer day."

They were married in 1940 and Betsy became his business manager and as strong an influence on him as his father, with whom she often battled for Andrew's favor. "I was part of a conspiracy to dethrone the king — the usurper of the throne," she told Mr. Meryman, Wyeth's biographer. "And I did. I put Andrew on the throne." She oversaw the publication of illustrated books, started a reproduction business, produced a film documentary about Wyeth and created a Wyeth archive.

Over the years, especially concerning the so-called Helga paintings, she also aggravated critics who thought she manipulated Wyeth's image inappropriately, an impression underscored by remarks like, "I'm a director and I had the greatest actor in the world."

After "Christina's World" Wyeth's fame skyrocketed. In 1949, Winston Churchill asked for Wyeth watercolors to decorate his room at the Ritz-Carlton in Boston. Harvard gave Wyeth an honorary degree in 1955. He made the cover of Time in 1963 when President Johnson gave him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He painted portraits of Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon.

A show of his work toured the country in 1966 and 1967, attracting huge crowds at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, the [Whitney Museum](#) and the [Art Institute of Chicago](#). The Brandywine River Museum in Pennsylvania opened in 1971, its main attraction a collection of Wyeths, donated by Mrs. Wyeth. In 1976, Wyeth was given a retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum.

Prices for his temperas escalated to \$100,000 in 1962, triple that by 1980. And later during the 80's, Japanese collectors were paying more than \$1 million for a Wyeth.

In 1986, Leonard E. B. Andrews, a Pennsylvania publisher of newsletters, among them Swine Flu Litigation Reporter, made front-page news reportedly spending \$6 million for 240 paintings by Wyeth that had never been exhibited. They were pictures of a woman, nude and clothed, named Helga Testorf. She was a sturdy blond married mother of four, a postwar refugee from Germany who worked as a housemaid to Wyeth's eccentric sister Carolyn in Chadds Ford. Wyeth had been painting her in a room at the Kuerner house for more than a decade, without his wife's knowledge, his wife said, before the works became known. When asked what the pictures were about, Mrs. Wyeth fueled prurient speculation by saying, "love."

Big money, the implication of sex and Wyeth's celebrity propelled Helga onto the covers of Time and Newsweek. The [National Gallery of Art](#) in Washington, which rarely organized shows of living artists, leapt to do an exhibition of the Helga pictures in 1987. The catalogue, with reproductions of Wyeth's soft-core renditions of his recumbent model, became a Book-of-the-Month Club best seller.

Mr. Andrews quickly turned around and sold the works and a few others to a Japanese collector reportedly for \$45 million, capitalizing on the publicity he had helped to orchestrate and on the National Gallery's prestige. J. Carter Brown, the gallery's director, having attracted hundreds of thousands of people to the show thanks to the hoopla, then professed to be shocked by Mr. Andrew's profiteering.

At that point, Wyeth denied there was ever any sexual relationship. Mrs. Wyeth explained that "love" was meant only to suggest the creative frisson between artist and model and that in fact she had seen a few of the works before, so they did not entirely come as a surprise, while maintaining that most of them really had been kept secret from her — that they were her husband's way of breaking loose from her and were genuinely upsetting to their marriage.

Critics lambasted the Wyeths and Mr. Andrews as hucksters. Wyeth, horrified, responded by saying the critics "were just looking to bop me on the head." Later Wyeth exhibitions were comparatively low key, and caused less of a fuss, perhaps also because an increasingly eclectic art world, which celebrated Norman Rockwell, found space to accommodate painters like Wyeth.

In later years, he became a familiar sight around Chadds Ford, driving his beat-up GMC Suburban through the fields and riverbeds with a sketch pad on the seat. Menus at the inn in Chadds Ford, where he had his regular seat at a corner table, were decorated with his sketches of Washington and Lafayette.

He lost a lung, survived a near-fatal illness, and had a hip operation, but kept working, energized partly by disdain for his detractors. "I'm not going to let them disrupt my old age," he said.

"I am an example of publicity — a great deal of it," he also said. "I'm grateful because it gives me the freedom to go and try to do better. But I never had any great idea that these people are understanding what I'm doing. And they don't."

Wyeth added: "Let's be sensible about this. I put a lot of things into my work which are very personal to me. So how can the public feel these things? I think most people get to my work through the back door. They're attracted by the realism and they sense the emotion and the abstraction — and eventually, I hope, they get their own powerful emotion."