



Andrew Wyeth: A Short Biography

Is Andrew Wyeth a Realist? A Regionalist? A painter of Rural American Life? A painter of Naturalism? Though he has been described as all of these, the artist continues to elude being classified neatly into any one category.

Andrew Newell Wyeth III was born on July 12, 1917. The youngest of five children of N.C. and Carolyn Wyeth, Andrew was named after N.C.'s great grandfather. He began drawing at an early age, but was not formally taught by his father until he was 15. His father began teaching Andrew academic art skills by having him draw white spheres and cubes on a neutral background with charcoal. Andrew did studies of the geometric forms, complete with accurate tone and shadows, for many months. He then studied the skeleton until he was able to draw the entire skeleton accurately from memory. Although most of the studio time with his father consisted of traditional academic drawing, Andrew also spent much time exploring, observing, and drawing the country around his Chadd's Ford home with pencil and watercolor. The family spent the summers in Port Clyde, Maine, where Andrew painted watercolor studies of the rocky coast and the sea.

Andrew achieved success in his 1920's with watercolor shows at the Macbeth Gallery in New York, and was featured on the cover of *American Artist* by age 25. He married Betsy James in 1940. They spent the summers with the Wyeth family in Port Clyde, Maine, and rented the old schoolhouse studio from N.C. in Chadd's Ford. They have two children: Nicholas, a successful art dealer, and James, a well-known artist. Andrew Wyeth continues to work everyday in his home in Pennsylvania.

Andrew mainly uses pencil, watercolor with drybrush, and tempera. He once stated, "With watercolor, you can pick up the atmosphere, the temperature, the sound of snow shifting through the trees or over the ice of a small pond or against a windowpane. Watercolor perfectly expresses the free side of my nature." (Hoving, p. 33)

The use of drybrush is used on top of the watercolor—layer upon layer like a weaving process. The drybrush builds tone and adds fine detail and texture to the work. The artist Peter Hurd, a former student of N.C. Wyeth, introduced the traditional medium of egg tempera to Andrew. Andrew loved the dryness of the paint and the earthiness of the dried pigments. "My temperas are very broadly painted in the very beginning. Then I tighten down on them. Tempera is, in a sense, like building, really building in great layers," (Hoving, p. 34) he stated.

Two areas, the Olson farm in Maine and the Kuerner farm in Chadd's Ford, provided inspiration for many of Wyeth's works. "Kuerner's was right over the hill from where I was born. I was intrigued by the fact that Karl Kuerner was a soldier who fought in the German army and came to America right after the war, became a hired farmer, and finally owned a farm. The abstract, almost military quality of that farm originally appealed to me and still does. Everything is utilized," he said (Hoving, p. 39-40).

"I went to Maine when I was a very young boy with my father and mother. Through the Olsons', Cristina and Alvero and their house, I really began to see New England as it really was—just the opposite to the Kuerners. The world of New England was in that house overlooking the mouth of the Georges River" (Hoving, p. 42).

About his painting, Wyeth said, "I go beyond the subject. That's the summation of my art. Emotion is my bulwark. I think that's the only thing that endures finally. If you are emotionally involved, you're not going to be easily changed. But if it's purely a technical experience that's going to be very short-lived. Both technical and emotional have got to be on even terms to be good" (Hoving, p. 185).

Note: There are many articles, biographies, and reviews of Andrew Wyeth and his art. Many may be found on Web sites and references included in [The Art of the Wyeths](#) unit. Perhaps another way of getting to know the artist is to spend time looking at his work, including his drawings and studies for paintings.

References:

Hoving, Thomas. *Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth: A Conversation with Andrew Wyeth*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978.

Meryman, Richard. *Andrew Wyeth, A Secret Life*. NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996.

Wyeth, A. *Andrew Wyeth Autobiography*. Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1995.