A New Adventure
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Introduction

My essay title, *A New Adventure*, has a double meaning. The first relates to the adventure of finding a third essay topic. The challenge, as we all know, is not a paucity of possible subjects, but the opposite. The second is about an American adventure.

So far, my Kit Kat essays connect to an ongoing interest in better understanding the Rubik cube of American history. Finding different insights into who we are, where we came from and how we connect.

This time, I'm off in a new, largely uncharted direction: American painting. Before I went down this road, I would have been a good candidate for Jay Leno's "Jay- walking." He could have asked me questions about American painting and unless they were limited to a few iconic images – think of Grant Wood's *American Gothic* – I would have been at a loss.

Until fairly recently, other than having a brother who became a graphic artist and the purchase of an occasional print, my closest brush with art came in spending many summer vacations in a small southern Vermont town with a history of artists living in the area, including the painter Rockwell Kent and the illustrator, Norman Rockwell.

I'll never forget going to the little Rockwell museum and seeing a middle aged man working there and then being told that he had been a Rockwell model when he was a teenager growing up in Arlington, Vermont. Then I saw Rockwell's illustrations of him and the resemblance was obvious … and amazing.

I also liked swimming at the old covered bridge over the Batten Kill River, which is a famous Vermont trout-fishing stream. The bridge sits right in front of Rockwell's former home and studio. Interestingly, while Rockwell used local folks for models, he never ventured into the beautiful Vermont countryside to paint.

The bridge from Rockwell to my essay topic is short. I decided to focus not on the brand new, but on the familiar but often little understood. I'm taking a closer look at an illustration-related family of artists that we have all heard about. The family is that of Andrew Wyeth, the "realist" painter who gave us *Christina's World* along with many other paintings that continue to fetch huge sums.

He's often described as a painter the general public loves and the modern art world loathes. This led one art historian to caste Wyeth as the most overrated *and* underrated

American artist. Wyeth is a realist of a unique sort who came onto the national scene at mid-century in the midst of the emergence of what appears to be his near opposite: abstract expressionism.

My quick tour into the world of the Wyeths has given me a glimpse of what is American about American art. Perhaps a stereotypical American question, as John Updike noted, the short answer is that it is as diverse and indelibly individualistic as the country; it's often under appreciated; and, critics to the contrary, the Wyeths are good cases in point. I've also learned that American artists have gone their own way from the beginning. The British saw it and said that the work of America's colonial painters was "liney" compared to their painterly ways. Think of the fine, hard lines of Boston artist John Singleton Copley's portrait of Paul Revere or, in more recent times, the spare, detailed temperas of Andrew Wyeth.

But don't worry, my tact in this essay is not art criticism; rather it's about a biographical focus, about the personalities and perspectives of the Wyeth family with a particular focus on N.C. and his son, Andrew. To understand them it helps to understand the family history. And what a story it is. Andrew is the most famous member of America's *only* three-generation family of famous fine artists. The Wyeth family art adventure began with Andrew's father, the famous American illustrator, N.C. Wyeth, who became the leading illustrator in America's "golden age" of illustration that started in the late 1800s.

The last member of the Wyeth family is the painter, Jamie Wyeth, who is still painting at 67 as the Boston Museum of Fine Arts prepares for a major, 2014 retrospective of his work. Surprisingly, at least for me, is the fact that Jamie's middle name is Browning, but no relation as far as I know.

So, let's take off for a trip through Wyeth country.

Howard Pyle and N.C. Wyeth: The Golden Age of Illustration

The Wyeth art journey begins in earnest with the creation of an art school in Wilmington, Delaware. The Howard Pyle School of Art was created by its namesake in 1900 and focused on the education of accomplished art students who wanted to become successful illustrators.

The founder of this one-man art school, Howard Pyle, was a leading illustrator who became the "father" of American illustration. The late 1800s through the early years of the 20th century was the sweet spot, the golden age, of American illustration. There was no television, no radio, no movies, and printing advancements combined with railroad transportation had allowed for the rapid spread of relatively cheap magazines. With commercial photography in its infancy, it did not compare with what top-notch

illustrators could do to liven books and magazine story lines. The eventual addition of color added further life to illustration.

The biggest growth in illustration took place in the 1870s. As many as nine thousand U.S. non-newspaper periodicals, many of them illustrated, had runs between 1865 and 1885. Though many were short-lived, the winners not only survived, they thrived. In 1885, for example, the circulation of the *Century Magazine* reached two hundred thousand, a huge number for the times.

Top illustrators were kings. Magazines like *Scribner's Monthly* and *Harper's Weekly* lead the charge in using their illustrations to captivate the reading public. Think of these artists as the Pixar and DreamWorks of their day. They were rock stars and they were paid extremely well. For instance, Frederic Remington the famous painter, illustrator and sculptor of the American west could sell his paintings for reproduction in magazines for ten or twenty times what they were worth to collectors.

One of these highly paid rock stars came in the unlikely form of Howard Pyle, a self-described "Quaker gentleman." Pyle was raised in Wilmington, Delaware. His father was in the leather tanning business and his mother was a lover of reading and art. And so was Howard. He drew, wrote and painted continuously from an early age. He took art classes in Philadelphia beginning at age 16 and he was an early student at the New York City based Art Students League, which started in 1875.

Howard's timing was nearly perfect. He moved quickly beginning in the mid-1870s to submit illustrations to major magazines; he even wrote fairy tales for *St. Nicholas*, a popular children's magazine. Pyle received his big break in 1877 when *Harper's* published a two-page illustration titled *A Wreck in the Offing*. Though the road was initially bumpy, his illustration skills were soon prized, as was his fixation with accurate historical detail, which was a trait that distinguished his work throughout his career. And he was well connected with his fellow artists and illustrators, including Edward Austin Abbey and William Merritt Chase.

The ever-patriotic Pyle resisted pressure to study art in Europe. Historian David McCullough recently documented this 19th century "greater journey" of American artists studying in Paris and other European cities. But Pyle didn't think that America was culturally or artistically inferior to Europe and so he didn't see a reason to go there particularly since the Europeans looked down upon illustration as a lesser art form. Meanwhile, American critics touted illustration as a "distinctive national art form" and applauded the ability of illustrators to contextualize the moments they portrayed. Instead of heading to Europe, Pyle explored U.S. history for subject matter. For instance, his work for *Harper's* included a sustained focus on colonial and early national history. Pyle soon established a reputation as a brilliant interpreter of America's history who had a superb understanding of narrative and narrative suspense. You could see it in his popular

pirate and American Revolutionary War scenes and in his illustrations from *Robin Hood* to *Dead Men Tell* No *Tales* to a four-volume series on King Arthur.

Pyle's career could easily have kept him in New York. But he had other plans. He returned to Wilmington, married, kept illustrating and at the height of his professional career when he was earning one of the highest incomes in the business – often over $50,000 a year – he decided to add art school instruction to his life. He taught at the Drexel Institute of Art in Philadelphia for a few years in the 1890s eventually becoming the director of the illustration program. The program attracted many students who went on to nationally recognized careers. The list includes Maxfield Parrish and Jessie Wilcox Smith. Success led Pyle to the revelation that he could open his own art school and that's what he did. His goal was to focus exclusively on the training of first-rate, nationally recognized American illustrators. Importantly, he wanted to make sure that these students got jobs even when they were still students.

Based by his home studio in Wilmington, the Howard Pyle School of Art began in 1900, lasted for just a few years and had only about thirty students (all men); however, it made a major mark on American illustration. Nearly every Pyle student went on to a successful career. And the student who was arguable the very best of the bunch was Newel Convers (N.C.) Wyeth.

N.C. Wyeth won a provisional spot in Pyle's school after competing with approximately 500 applicants for one of about a dozen spots. What's amazing is that Pyle attracted this many applicants while refusing to recruit any students at all. If you didn't want to apply on your own, he didn't want you as a student. It would be like Spielberg announcing that he was starting a film school with twelve slots for students and a commitment to connect each student with the film industry. No recruiting required.

N.C. was from Needham, Massachusetts. His father ran a small hay inspection business. Wyeth had significant art ability and interest from an early age. His mother encouraged it and his father questioned it and his likelihood of supporting himself if he pursued an artistic career. He tried to steer N.C. to train in the mechanical arts, but N.C. never waivered in his interest in art and illustration. So, when a friend told him about Pyle's new school, he jumped at the chance to apply.

N.C. Wyeth was a hit with Pyle from the beginning. He was a big, full-of-life character who could have been one of the full-blooded figures that Pyle loved to illustrate. N.C. was authentic and loved authenticity in his illustration. He purchased costumes, swords, helmets and other accouterments that brought emotion and authenticity to his illustration. Pyle loved it, in important part, because he did the same thing. Pyle encouraged N.C. to submit illustrations to major magazines within weeks of Wyeth's tenure as a student, which began in 1902. And it eventually worked. N.C. received his first commission from the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1903. It was a cover illustration of a cowboy on a

bucking bronco, which was a blatant takeoff on Frederic Remington's famous sculpture. And this was not to be an isolated success for a Pyle student. In fact, between 1906 and 1910, Pyle and his protégés provided 43 percent of all the illustrations in *Harper's* and 24 percent of *Scribner's* pictures.

With his training behind him and with Pyle's encouragement, N.C. headed west in 1904 as so many other Easterners did to experience the wild west; he lived the life of a cowboy for a short, but life changing month or so and then used the experience in his illustrations.

Wyeth was the classic Easterner gone west at the beginning of the American Century. His exuberant, swashbuckling enthusiasm was reminiscent of the occupant of the White House, Teddy Roosevelt. Both were bigger than life characters who embodied the ambitions of the new century and the Progressive Era. N.C. was such a big Roosevelt supporter that he marched in his 1904 inaugural parade with other "cowboys" and without permission.

N.C. and T.R. were lovers of the American West at a time when the frontier was closing and interest in glorifying the west was increasing. In fact, though he was from Oyster Bay, New York, Roosevelt was arguably our first western president. It's no surprise, then, that T.R. appreciated the western artwork of both N.C. Wyeth and Frederic Remington who were big admirers of each other's work.

Wyeth's time in the west was followed-up with a return to Wilmington. Quickly, using his ability and Pyle's connections, he began generating big illustration money, which gave him the means to purchase property in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, the home of Pyle's summer school art program.

Wyeth could soon afford a lavish life style. A nice home and studio, land, a tennis court and a limousine with a chauffeur. He had the works – all paid for with high illustration fees for classic books like *Treasurer Island,* which was arguably his masterwork. Other publications included *Kidnapped, Robin Hood, The Yearling,* Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* and *The Last of the Mohicans*. By the 1920s, a N.C. Wyeth illustration in a book almost guaranteed its success.

Wyeth's work was richly informed with detailed knowledge of his subject. He also had a unique ability to capture the suspense of a story by illustrating the action just before or after a big moment. N.C. worked very quickly and usually without models. For instance, he did 18 paintings for *Treasure Island* in just four months. Significantly, he was doing big oil paintings that his small illustrations were based upon.

Chadds Ford is located in the Brandywine River Valley in eastern Pennsylvania along the Delaware border. It's the site of a famous Revolutionary War battle, the Battle of the Brandywine, which proved disastrous for the Americans. Despite the involvement of

Washington and Lafayette the British surrounded the Americans and then marched off to take control of their capital, Philadelphia. It would be an understatement to say that this dramatic history sparked the imaginations of the Wyeths.

Chadds Ford has been the home of the Wyeth family for over one hundred years. In fact, Jamie Wyeth and, separately, his mother, Betsy, still have homes in the area. It's the place where N.C. built his business and raised his family, which included five children, four of whom became accomplished artists, including the youngest and most talented, Andrew, who was born in 1917. It was the place that attracted famous fans, including Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and the Hollywood actors Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford, who wanted N.C. to move to Hollywood and become part of the scene. An idea he considered and soon rejected.

Another famous visitor was Norman Rockwell. Rockwell thought that N.C. was a bit crazy, but respected his talent and the fact that he was a former Pyle student; and it's the Pyle connection that may have mattered most to Rockwell since Pyle was his hero. Rockwell idolized Howard Pyle and his devotion to historical accuracy and authenticity. Interestingly, Rockwell's connection to famous illustrators wasn't limited to Wyeth. For instance, at one point Rockwell rented the former New Rochelle, New York studio of one Frederic Remington.

Despite all his success in illustration and in the painting of fantastic murals for commercial and government buildings, N.C. Wyeth was always troubled by the fact that he was primarily an illustrator and not a painter. He never had a solo showing of his paintings. He struggled with this throughout his career and, according to his grandson, Jamie, it made him a very self-conscious painter. The context of his career, including the evolution of modern art that was punctuated in America with New York's 1913 Armory Show, also had its impact on N.C. though, as you might imagine, his response was not particularly positive.

Nevertheless, many of N.C.'s paintings have been well received and continue to draw big prices; in fact, anyone, including Jamie Wyeth who tries, would be hard pressed to beat Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and other Hollywood types who jump at the chance to pay big prices for his work. This group, not surprisingly, does the same thing with the work of Norman Rockwell. Great storytellers apparently appreciate the storytelling abilities of great illustrators.

Andrew Wyeth

But what about N.C. Wyeth's famous son, Andrew? Andrew grew up a free, fiercely independent spirit, a real outsider. Born with a hitched hip, Wyeth was often sickly as a child with respiratory and other problems and faced a near fatal lung surgery as a relatively young adult. Breathing was difficult and mortality was no abstraction. But that

didn't stop him from being a renegade racing around his neighborhood playing Robin Hood and using his father's costumes to make his adventures even more exciting. Andrew's dashing personality stayed with him throughout his life, which ended at the age of 91 in 2009. Despite this adventuresome personality, Andrew was basically a homebody who was home schooled and who lived within walking distance of his family home his entire life. His friends in his rural community were every day folks and that, too, would remain largely the case throughout his life.

N.C. saw Andrew's budding artistic talent, but left him alone to go his own way until Andrew reached 15 and said that he wanted to study with him. Drilled endlessly in drawing and painting shapes of all sizes, even a skeleton (which he eventually drew from memory), Andrew once characterized this as a two-year period when he was his father's prisoner. N.C. proved to be a wonderful teacher and, at times, a fearsome father and taskmaster. N.C. so much wanted his son in his life that when Andrew told him that he was getting married N.C. reacted by saying he should never do it and, instead, N.C. would take care of him and help advance his artistic career. To his credit, Andrew ignored this advice and married his wife, Betsy, who he proposed to after knowing her for just one week.

Andrew's training naturally included an introduction to the work of Howard Pyle. Andrew loved Pyle's style, which borrowed liberally from many artistic sources, old and new. And in some ways as a rejection of his father, Andrew's art journey soon took a turn away from illustration and into watercolor paintings focused on the Maine coastline.

Reminiscent of Winslow Homer's seascapes, Andrew's watercolors were full of action and emotion. N.C. recognized that they were spectacular; he moved quickly to help arrange Andrew's first one-man show at the Macbeth Gallery in New York. This 1937 show was an immediate success with every painting sold. Despite the fact that the Depression was still on and Andrew was only 20, he had succeeded brilliantly in starting his career.

From watercolors Andrew moved to what he is now best known for and that is his temperas. Made from a mix of egg yolks, distilled water and dry pigment, tempera painting takes patience, precision and skill in adding layer upon layer of texture. His brother-in-law, Peter Hurd, originally encouraged Andrew's move to temperas. This shift in mediums amounted to an even bigger shift away from the big, bold oils of his father's paintings and illustrations.

But what did not change for Andrew was his devotion to painting what he knew. And what he knew was two places: His hometown of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania and Port Clyde, Maine, which is where the Wyeths had a second home. Almost every Wyeth painting that exists is of people, places and objects that Andrew Wyeth knew on a very personal level. Of course, this includes his most famous painting, *Christina's World*.

Christina Olson was the neighbor of his future wife, Betsy James. Betsy's parents were from upstate New York, but had a summer home in South Cushing, Maine. Christina and her brother, Alvaro, were not "summer people;" they were Mainers through and through. Their home was close to the ocean and their ways were those of low-income working people living off the sea and then the land and, in the process, trying to hold onto the home that they inherited from their parents. Christina had a disability, probably polio, which made it impossible for her to walk. She refused to use a wheel chair; instead, she would either scoot herself around in a chair or crawl on the floor or ground. Talk about flinty, Yankee independence; Christina had it. Andrew regarded her as so quintessentially Maine that he sometimes referred to her as the "queen" of Maine.

The very first day Andrew met Betsy she took him to Olson's to meet Christina and to see how he would react. It was a character test that Andrew passed with flying colors. The place was a mess and smelled badly given Christina's lack of personal hygiene. Andrew was not revolted; he was intrigued. Though he had tried to impress 17-year-old Betsy by saying he was a medical student, she quickly learned that he was an artist and that he wanted to return to the Olson's and paint.

And paint he did. In fact, Andrew painted the Olson's and their home and possessions from 1939 until Christina died in 1968. *Christina's World* is the most famous of these paintings. It is one of the most iconic 20th century American paintings ever produced. It's a picture of Christina sitting in a field on an incline wearing a pink dress and looking up toward her weathered, wooden home. In 1948, Wyeth spent four months on the painting. When he finished it, he hung it up in his house and no one commented on it. When he finally sent it off to a New York gallery he told his wife that it was a complete "flat tire."

Well, that flat tire got an immediate and positive response from the art world. The pros loved it and the Museum of Modern Art purchased it for $1,800.00. What a great deal for the Museum!

Surprisingly, *Christina's World* was a painting that did not include Christina until late in the process. Wyeth even said that the painting would have been better if he could have captured the same sense of isolation and longing without her. For Wyeth, what was not in a painting was often more important than what was in it.

In explaining the painting, Wyeth has said that his aim was not simply to picture loneliness and physical limitations, but to convey the challenge of limitless possibilities: "The challenge to me was to do justice to her [Christina's] extraordinary conquest of a life which most people would consider hopeless. If in some small way I have been able in paint to make the viewer sense that her world may be limited physically but by no means spiritually, then I have achieved what I set out to do."

This painting is a leading example of Wyeth being more than a "realist;" instead, he's continually painting subjects as metaphors, emotions and even fantasies. These underlying realities can get lost in the virtuoso performance that is his technical ability – his ability to paint things the way they look, if you will. The general public gets this part and likes it. They also get the wonderment in his paintings. Less obvious, but more important to Wyeth, is the emotion he is painting. His scenes and figures have been described as ghost like as though he is painting a dream. This mixture of realism and fantasy helps explain why the Museum of Modern Art included Wyeth in a 1943 show titled *Americans 1943: Realists and Magical Realists.* Andrew was there as a magical realist.

The exhibit catalog, which was written by Filene's department store scion, Lincoln Kirstein, gave definition to magical realism. He described it as an application of the realist "technique to the fantastic subject. Magic realists try to convince us that extraordinary things are possible simply by painting them as if they existed…. Historically, this kind of painting stems from the Low Countries and from Italy…. There is emotion, but the feeling runs narrow and deep rather than violent or accidental."

Some experts argue that Andrew's interest in fantasy and in painting outsiders comes from his own fierce independence, his own sense of being on the outside looking in. His personal biography, including his health problems, also helps explain his preoccupation with death and with the fragility of life. You can see it in many of his paintings, including *Christina's World* and *Trodden Weed*, with the latter being a painting of Andrew walking around after his near-fatal lung surgery in boots that once belonged to Howard Pyle. The painting focuses on the boots with one foot having just crushed a weed.

The long history of painting the familiar can be seen in his selection of models. He painted his neighbors and friends in Chadds Ford and Maine. And he painted them for long periods of time. This wasn't just true for Christina Olson. It was true for his German farmer neighbors in Chadds Ford, Karl and Anna Kuerner. It was also true for Maine teenager and neighbor, Siri Erickson, who Wyeth started painting almost immediately after Christina Olson died.

And it's also true for another Chadds Ford neighbor and model, Helga Testorf, who was made famous, in part, because Wyeth told no one but the Kuerners, including his wife, about his paintings of her, many of them nudes, until he stopped painting them after 14 years. Then, in 1986, when he did release these works, many critics went through the roof viewing Wyeth and even Betsy as schemers and sensationalists who were out to make big money. And, in case you're wondering, this did not prove to be a great way for Andrew to enhance his relationship with his wife. They survived the storm, but it wasn't ideal.

The models as friends – or friends as models – trend was also true for Walt Anderson, a Maine ne'er-do-well and fellow outsider who Wyeth befriended as a child. Walt was a man he stayed close friends with and painted until Anderson died in 1987 at which point Wyeth's Maine painting days largely ended.

From the beginning, Andrew's whole approach to painting worried N.C. N.C. knew that Andrew had great talent, but he worried that the guy couldn't tell a story and that no one would buy his art.

Take a famous painting of Walt Anderson. It's called *Turkey Pond* and it's a picture of Anderson walking through a field of tall grass and away from the viewer. N.C. saw it and told Andrew that it didn't work. He suggested that Andrew paint a gun into Walt's hands and some ducks in the distance.

Andrew's famous painting, *Soaring*, is a picture of a buzzard flying over Kuerner's farm. Some have interpreted it as a metaphor for World War Two enemy planes flying overhead creating great anxiety. True or not, N.C. saw it and immediately told Andrew that it wasn't a painting. Andrew was so upset that he put the painting in his basement and let his sons use it as part of the base for their train set. Only years later with prodding from Lincoln Kirstein did Andrew finish and sell the painting.

At other times, N.C. would tell Andrew to use more color. He'd say that there was no color in the paintings suggesting that they were all boring variations on earth tones – browns, grays and off-whites. I imagine that N.C. also had problems with his son's devotion to gray skies, eerie scenes, desolate fields and dead birds, but, of course, these objects were more than themselves.

With this in mind, Jamie Wyeth says that his grandfather just didn't "get" what Andrew was doing. He didn't get that Andrew had his own magic, his own sense of wonder whether it was his many paintings that created views through windows or his incredible ability to turn inanimate objects, even stones, into magical, fantastic entities.

All of this led Andrew to say again and again that he was no realist and, in fact, that much of his painting was loaded with abstraction. In a *Time* article, Wyeth went so far as to proclaim: "I'm no more like a realist, such as Eakins or Copley, than I'm like the man in the moon." And in the same interview, Andrew went further in stating that he was "a pure abstractionist in my thought." Yet all the Wyeths thought that the subject of a painting mattered most and they felt that since photography this traditional sense had increasingly been displaced by the importance of the painter.

But the modern art world didn't seem to care. Even *Christina's World* was viewed by many art critics as "kitschy-anachronistic, sentimental, and too easily accessible."

Meanwhile, though the general public loved Wyeth's realism they often missed his symbolism and his focus on the outsider, folks like himself who lived on the outskirts of mainstream society. This focus with its primarily rural profile is viewed by the art historian, Henry Adams, as Wyeth painting individuals who were not doing well as the nation moved inexorably from an agrarian to an urban and post- industrial identity. These were people who were not making this historic transition successfully, yet they were loaded with history and humanity – and, like Christina, with both weaknesses and profound strengths.

In some ways, Wyeth's paintings stand in sharp contrast to the communal, idealized small town scenes of positivity painted and illustrated by Norman Rockwell. Rockwell's paintings exude success in the same historical context. And their popularity continues to this day; it was reflected in the record-setting $46 million auction of Rockwell's famous *Saying Grace* painting earlier this month. And, just think, this was a painting that Rockwell gave away as was often the case with illustrations because the paintings were done not as works of art in themselves, but as part of the process of creating an illustration.

Concluding Thoughts

In the end, the Wyeth story is a great American adventure. It involves incredibly talented artists trying to use realism to capture bigger truths. After all, they knew that realism for realism's sake would be deadly boring and lifeless. N.C. Wyeth may have been the best storyteller of the group. Of course, his son, Andrew, gets most of the attention. Andrew, as we all know, was an internationally regarded artist with many prestigious awards. Selected by JFK, he's the first artist to receive the Presidential Freedom Award, which is the nation's highest civilian honor. He was also awarded the National Medal of Arts in 2007.

The Wyeths have many strengths in common. At heart, each shares Andrew's ability, as one insightful observer has said, to hold on to an American legacy from the 19th century, which is an awareness of transcendental moments in the midst of everyday life.

If we turn to Jamie for additional insight into Andrew, he will say that his dad was a painter of crystalline, airless worlds of his imagination. With a relentless focus on the living past, Wyeth's objects are often used as metaphors for deeply personal stories. Andrew, for example, might say that he could reveal more emotion, more humanity, by painting an article of clothing than painting the person who wore it.

So, who was the central character of this story? Was Andrew a master artist embodying traditional American values to the middle class or a conservative sentimentalist? As has been suggested, both images miss the mark. Yet they also help explain why Andrew Wyeth's paintings have been described as a cultural Rorschach test? A "believing is

seeing" moment, to quote novelist Tom Wolfe, where supporters believe they are seeing a great artist revealing meaning in American life and history and doing so in an age of anxiety and rapid change. And critics believe they are seeing a throw back to another era, a regional sentimentalist, a technically adept outsider, who is disconnected from the heart of his own times and the developments of the future.

Let me finish the Wyeth story by saying that there was both emulation and rejection among the three generations of Wyeth painters. N.C. copied Howard Pyle yet blamed him for limiting his ability to move from illustration to fine art painting. Andrew copied N.C. and his love of painting emotion and authenticity, and his obsession with the past where history isn't dates but, instead, is, as Andrew said, "the way the landscape looks in the moonlight." Yet despite these similarities, Andrew's approach was entirely different than his father's – as different as oil is from watercolor or tempera; as different as bright, bold colors are from muted grays and browns. These differences roll right down to the fact that while N.C.s studio was loaded with props of all kinds, Andrew's studio had almost nothing in it.

And, Jamie, though he has painted magical realist works that could be mistaken for his father's temperas, is much closer in artistic style and technique – right down to wearing knickers at times – to his grandfather who used oils and much more color than Andrew employed. It will take another essay, obviously, to do justice to Jamie's work, which ranged from famous portraits of John Kennedy and Andy Warhol to dramatic paintings of seagulls.

No matter the differences, it's tough to read about the Wyeths and view their works and not understand that they were deeply committed to their craft. You can see it in their various artistic achievements and in a great story told by Andrew. He tells a story about the time that one of his heroes, Edward Hopper, was looking at one of Andrew's paintings of light and saying that he's been trying to paint sunlight on a white wall for seventy years and "he can't get it either."

This comment is consistent with how Jamie Wyeth characterizes himself and his father and grandfather: They were completely consumed with getting "it" right and they never really stopped trying throughout their artistic lives. Jamie goes so far as to say that it's an "obsession." He lives the life to this day spending much of his time on Maine's famous Monhegan Island where he lives in a home that Rockwell Kent built for Kent's mother. Yes, I've found without looking that the lives of many American painters are almost magically connected.

And magic is a good word for the Wyeths. I talked with art historian and fellow Ohioan, Henry Adams, about the Wyeths. He has met both Andrew and Jamie and he says that they are charismatic characters. When he spoke with Andrew he was treated like he was the only guy on the planet. Adams says that Wyeth was completely present and fully

engaged – a dashing personality who could have been an actor. David Michaelis, who wrote a biography of N.C., agrees. He says that Andrew is so full of life, so present, it's as though he has light beaming out of his eyes. The guy's almost "Buddistic," according to Michaelis.

I'll end by saying the obvious: The Wyeths make for a classic, American tale; an adventure lived out primarily in the great American Century. I can't pay them a higher compliment than to say that they would be great subjects for their own artwork.

I am an admirer of the Wyeths' art and believe that the best of it will stand the test of time. If I'm right it may be, in part, because of what art critic Robert Hughes wrote to explain Andrew's fame. Hughes said that: "If the most famous artist in America is Andrew Wyeth, … [it is] because his work suggests a frugal, bare-bones rectitude, glazed by nostalgia but incarnated in real objects, which millions of people look back upon as the lost marrow of American history."

Thank you.