

Andrew Wyeth: Autobiography Study Guide

Andrew Wyeth: Autobiography by Thomas Hoving

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Plot Summary

Andrew Newell Wyeth (1917-2009) is an artist and realist painter whose work focuses mainly in particularly regions within Maine and Pennsylvania. In the middle of the 20th century, he is one of the best known artists in the United States and is sometimes seen as the "Painter of the People" given that his paintings are so popular among the American public. Wyeth frequently paints scenes from his home of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania and his summer home in Cushing, Maine. While Wyeth paints before the 1940s, it is not until October 1945 that his mature style begins to develop. This consolidation is brought on by the death of Wyeth's father, a personal tragedy for him. Wyeth's work comes to be known for its subdued colors, deep realism and the depiction of people or objects with significant emotional impact and symbolism.

Wyeth has several particular locations and people that he likes to paint. For instance, he enjoys painting the Olson family and the Kuerner family. The Olsons are his neighbors in Cushing, Maine and the Kuerner's are his neighbors in Chadds Ford. Wyeth's most famous painting is arguably *Christina's World*, a picture of Christina Olson lying partly contorted in a field. Christina has some sort of muscular deterioration that paralyzed the lower half of her body and kept her on her family's farm. Wyeth paints her and her brother for twenty-eight years. Wyeth's mature career remains deeply realistic and focused on landscape subjects and models of his favored areas in Pennsylvania and Maine. His walks in the countryside are his main sources of inspiration and gives him an intimate connection with the land and sea and its histories in the area. Wyeth tends to focus on painting in watercolor, dry brush and egg tempera.

When Christina Olson dies, Wyeth starts to paint a girl named Siri Erikson; this a prelude to his famous Helga paintings, when in 1986 Wyeth creates 247 studies of his neighbor, a Prussian immigrant named Helga Testorf. Wyeth's work is often controversial, though not because it is too abstract, like much twentieth century art, but rather because he is a representational artist, trying to capture the real world. Art critics often find him formulaic.

Andrew Wyeth: Autobiography is a collection of over one hundred and twenty of Wyeth's paintings and his commentary on the paintings, primarily on their inspiration. However, the comments also tell the story of his life and his characters; they also illustrate his personality. Thomas Hoving, a former director of the Museum of Modern Art, writes the introduction and the comments recorded in the book are comments Wyeth makes to Hoving.

Introduction, Paintings 1-20

Introduction, Paintings 1-20 Summary and Analysis

Thomas Hoving, in his introduction to Andrew Wyeth's autobiography, begins by noting that it took him a long time to get to know Wyeth as a person, but that it took even longer to get to know him as an artist. What unites both Wyeth the man and Wyeth the artist is that he is independent and has been from an early age. He struggles with his art despite being free and undisciplined. He hides his paintings often and seems at many times to be painting only for himself. His reasons for starting a painting are often bizarre. Wyeth's paintings are free, dreamlike and draw romantic associations. They have been so for five decades. Wyeth is no romantic but he brings his emotions to bear in a dispassionate, detached manner from his subjects. His style eschews technique. He finds pencil drawing very emotional. Further, he finds other forms of media emotion-evoking as well. Subject matter, however, is most important to him. He thinks you never have to add life to a scene; these scenes are discovered by accident. In these accidents, he increasingly hopes, over the years, that something random or unlikely will add incongruity to a scene. Sometimes he takes risks, though they are not contrived.

In many ways, Wyeth's paintings are like dreams, where there are deep emotional and person associations, though they are hidden from obvious detection in what is depicted. A danger with this style is that one is easily misunderstood. Wyeth also increasingly experiments and re-conceptualizes his use of light, from a passive object of painting a scene to a kind of active subject, shaping the meaning of a picture. The remainder of the book contains copies of Wyeth's paintings and his explanations of them. This section includes brief descriptions of the first twenty paintings, including the painting title, the year and a brief explanation in groups of five.

Spring Landscape at Kuerners, 1933, is an oil-painting produced when Wyeth was sixteen. He gives it to a friend and years later sells it to buy a tractor; he receives twelve thousand dollars for it. Lobster Traps, 1939, is painted when Wyeth is twenty during his "blue sky" period of water colors. The painting is for his second show at Macbeth Gallery in New York City. Winter Corn Field, Study, 1942, represents Wyeth's education walking around in cornfields and woods. Pennsylvania Landscape, 1942, is Wyeth's attempt to represent all of Pennsylvania in one picture, something that excites him enough to try to communicate to others their ability to take on similar great tasks. Before Picking, 1942, is a painting of smokehouse apple trees in Wyeth's father's orchard.

The next painting is After Picking, 1942, which is of the same type of tree after the harvest. Blackberry Branch, 1943, is one Wyeth enjoys painting in oil; he eats each berry after he paints it. Spring Beauty, 1943, is important for his developing way of seeing reality; it moves away from the "impressionism" of his earlier work and shows him changing and seeing life more clearly. Road Cut, 1940, is a painting of a road running through a valley in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. When his wife Betty comes to Chadds, before they are married, he shows her the painting and she is impressed. The

painting also represents a lot about him and his aspirations. Christmas Morning, 1944, is Wyeth's first painting that concerns death, which draws from a woman he knows that dies.

Crows, 1944, represents crows hanging on a fence that his friend Karl Kuerner's son had shot. Winter Corn, 1948, is a painting of a lonely cornfield near Lafayette's headquarters in Cadds Ford. The corn is abandoned and Wyeth thinks it is his best painting of corn. Front Room, 1946 is a painting of the front room in Betsy's family's house with a Victorian chair in it. It is very spontaneous. Hoffman's Slough, 1947, starts from an idea that arises during the winter in Maine. He sees a dark swamp that has pure gold light at its top. The picture gives a sense of space. The Sexton, 1950, is a painting of a grave digger in Maine, creating a grave in the same graveyard where Betsy's mother is buried. Waino Mattson, a Finn, is digging the grave.

Toll Rope, 1951, is the inside of a church at Wylie's Corner in Maine. Wyeth enjoys the belfry and sees it as representing New England as a whole. Trodden Weed, 1951, is a self-portrait of Wyeth's shoes. The painting is created after a dangerous eight-hour operation on his lung. The painting occurs to him during a walk around Chadds intended to help him recover. The painting is very emotional for him. James Loper, 1952, is a painting of one of the people Wyeth grew up with in Chadds Ford. James stands with his horse harness belt and scythe staring off into the distance. Cooling Shed, 1953, is a picture of a cooling shed that reminds Wyeth of his childhood. It is an abstraction Wyeth finds inside of a home, which is not a typical source of inspiration for him. Blue Door, 1952, is the door of Wyeth's long-time subject, Christina Olson. Wyeth is trying to capture the afternoon light despite fog from outside.

Paintings 21-70

Paintings 21-70 Summary and Analysis

Wyeth spends almost a year working on *Snow Flurries*, 1953. The shadows of clouds over one of his favorite hills are particularly hard to capture. His challenge is not overdoing simplicity or being too dramatic. *Flock of Crows*, 1953, is a painting of left-over birds that does not make it into *Snow Flurries*, despite inspiring the original painting. In *Teel's Island*, 1954, Wyeth notes that a man named Henry Teel has a punt that he hauls up on a bank. Teel dies soon thereafter. The boat represents the ephemeral nature of life to Wyeth. In *Edge of the Field*, 1955, Wyeth paints a bleak scene. His father tells him that he is worried about Wyeth's future because of the bleak quality of his paintings, but an art critic tells his father that the somber quality of Wyeth's paintings is a strength. *Onions*, 1955 is a painting of Bermuda onions in a dry, brown barn.

Blue Box, 1956, is a watercolor painting that depicts the inside of the barn at Olson's in Maine. The chimney casts an odd shadow in it. It is a real New England barn. The painting has a bright blue spot and Wyeth feels strongly that it is appropriate. *Roasted Chestnuts*, 1956, is a painting of a boy named Allen Messersmith standing on Highway 202 in Pennsylvania. The road in the picture has an ancient feel. Allen is wearing an Eisenhower jacket and President Eisenhower has the painting on loan in the White House for a time. *Tom and His Daughter*, 1959, is painted after Tom's daughter is groggy from alcohol and sex from a date the previous night. Tom is dignified in the photo but the daughter is hardly represented. *The Bed*, 1956, is a study for Wyeth's *Chambered Nautilus* painting that contains a comparison of shape between a bed spindle and the canopy around it. *Rope and Chains*, 1956, contains a tree and chain where Karl Kuerner slaughters a pig but that also contains child's bells, which mixes the innocence of children with brutality.

Brown Swiss, 1957, contains many complexities as it is a double portrait with reflections of a house in a pond. This is the Kuerner house and the painting is also a double portrait of what goes on in the house. The painting is personal to Wyeth; it develops over a long period of time. *Hay Ledge*, 1957, is a picture of a lobster boat owned by his friend Alvaro Olsen. It hangs in a hay loft. *Raccoon*, 1958, represents two dogs and Wyeth is not sure he likes it. *Floating Leaves*, 1958, is painted after Wyeth is taken by the shape and idea of leaves floating in a stream; their floating and disappearing is both exciting and melancholy at once. *Groundhog Day, Study*, 1958, starts off with Wyeth sketching Nellie, Karl Kuerner's German shepherd. The painting fades into color when scenery enters the picture.

Half Bushel, 1959, is a painting of a half-full bushel of apples in the late fall in Pennsylvania in Wyeth's father's orchard. It is an attempt to represent autumn. The painting represents the element of art that cannot be taught to students. *Geraniums*, 1960, is one of the most important paintings of the Christina Olson series that has a few

bright red flowers. Christina can barely be seen. The Mill, 1959, is one of the best watercolors Wyeth ever did, in his opinion. Young Bull, 1960, is a painting of Kuerner's farm which requires many drawings at first. It also contains a young bull in the center of the painting. Pleasant Point, 1960, is a portrait of a Maine lake, near where Wyeth lives; it represents delicacy and a significant, peaceful, quiet moment in time and space.

Distant Thunder, 1961, evolved in a strange way. Wyeth wanted to paint Betsy but it is not working until Wyeth decides to hide and finds her sleeping in a field. This scene becomes the painting. Winter Bees, 1959, is a painting of a comb bursting with bees. Milk Cans, 1961, causes Wyeth to note that pictures just happen sometimes, like when he is down at Adam's farm in Chadds Ford where Adam keeps pigs. Adam, Study, 1963, is painted with a tremendous amount of energy. Garret Room, 1962, is a drybrush of Tom Clark that depicts him sleeping on an amazing bedspread made by his grandmother. Tom appears taller than he is.

The Trophy, 1963, is a picture of moose horns on Karl Kuerner's outer house wall that he had hunted and sums up a lot of Karl's sharpness; it contains a hidden side of his nature. Marsh Hawk, 1964, is painted in Pennsylvania. It depicts a house and some hay wagons with beautiful colors that date back one hundred years. Woodchopper, 1964, depicts Willard Snowden sitting under a silver maple and represents relaxation. The Peavey, 1965 represents the extraordinary and unusual looking Peavey tool used by woodsmen and loggers. It looks like a terrible medieval instrument. Storm at Sea, 1965, is painted after Wyeth is entranced by seagulls walking around on a wharf by a lighthouse.

Weatherside, 1965, has more studies for the portrait of the Olson house than for anything else and represents Wyeth's interest in the structure of the building. The drawings are put together in the painting as if Wyeth is the builder. It is a true portrait of the house, not a picturesque one. The house cannot last and the painting represents this fact—that things do not last, like Wyeth's father. Wood Stove, 1962, tries to be a portrait of the Olson house, a house fragile on the outside but full of secrets on the inside. It also depicts Christina. Gunning Rocks, 1966, depicts Walter Anderson—a Maine boy, part American Indian, part Finn. Wyeth has known him since he was thirteen and he dies at only fifty-four. The Sweep, 1967, is a sweep of the view of the lowering wet sky over the ocean. It symbolizes streamlined, special beauty like it serves a purpose. Slight Breeze, 1968, is a Woodward farm in Chadds Ford and contains an image that is reminiscent of a woman on crutches, Phyllis. She buys the painting immediately; she knows it represents her just by looking at it.

My Sister, 1967, depicts Wyeth's sister Carolyn in her true, contemplative element. Spring Fed, Study, 1967 is a drawing of trickling water on the Kuerner farm that looks like a sarcophagus. Room After Room, 1967, is another painting of Christina Olson that Betsy and Wyeth keep for themselves. It is a magic moment. Logging Scoot, 1968, is a Maine picture of a scoot that moves logs and is covered with spring mud. Incoming Sea, 1966, is a water color of a dory after the tide turns. It is a picture of the heart of Maine that will never change.

Cider Barrel, 1969, depicts one of Karl Kuerner's cider barrels. It contains fresh fermented cider; Karl never reveals how he does it, not even to his son. Post and Rail, 1967, depicts Willard Snowden with a shovel at a post. Alvaro and Christina, 1968, represents the entire Olson environment. Wyeth paints it in the summer after Christina and her brother Alvaro die. Pumpkins, 1968, is done at the Erikson's house. Mr. George Erikson grows a lot of pumpkins but Wyeth stops painting pumpkins after he realizes how common they are; the same goes for his nudes. Buzzard's Glory, 1969, depicts a Chadds Ford boy named Johnny Lynch, Jimmy Lynch's half-brother. Wyeth is drawn in by his jet-black hair. The painting is created in an area called Buzzard's Glory, where people eat buzzards, which disgusts Wyeth.

End of Olsons, 1969, is another picture of the Olson house, the last painting Wyeth does of the house, since the Olsons have died. The Swinger, 1969, represents Jimmy Lunch on the porch of a house in Chadds Ford with debonair boots. He is a natural person and loves the land. He looks very American. The Finn, 1969, is a portrait of Siri Erikson's father, George Erikson, which Wyeth paints after he deals with the awkwardness of asking Siri to ask her father if he can paint her nude. Siri, 1970, comes to Wyeth as he paints Anna Christina, his last portrait of Christina Olson. After he meets Siri, he cannot stop thinking about painting her, as she represents the rebirth of something fresh out of Christina's death. The paintings of Siri are all continuations of the Christina portraits. She is zestful after pictures of Christina, which represent decay. Dam Breast, 1970, is painted at Kuerner's in the middle of the winter. Wyeth is drawn in by a spume of water froth mixed with freezing ice.

Paintings 71-124

Paintings 71-124 Summary and Analysis

Ice Storm, 1971, depicts Johnny Lynch with dark black hair in Wyeth's Pennsylvania studio. He appears brooding, which sums up Pennsylvania for Wyeth. Evening at Kuerners, 1970, shows Karl's house but it has few studies as Karl is very ill. It is very emotional for Wyeth to paint. Spruce Gun, 1973, shows Wyeth's point in Maine where a cannon sits on a shoreline. It is a real cannon that Wyeth buys in an auction. Ericksons, 1973, shows only Siri's father despite the fact that Siri is supposed to be in it topless. Instead, Siri's father simply sits by a window, looking outside. It is the perfect portrait of the Erickson house. In The Ides of March, 1974, Wyeth paints his dog, Rattler, sleeping in front of their fireplace in the Pennsylvania Mill. Rattler is a golden retriever.

From the Capes, 1974, shows Dr. Margaret Handy with her hair down, which exposes her part-Indian blood. Rum Runner, 1974, shows Walter Anderson against his dory, though the painting is begun in 1945. Wyeth sells it to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts but he has to repair it. Easter Sunday, 1975, is a picture of Anna on the Kuerners' porch in a pose much like an earlier painting of Helga. Mill in Winter, 1978, shows Wyeth's gristmill in Chadds Ford before a snowstorm. The painting shows a sort of danger. The Kass, 1975, is a painting that Wyeth gives to Mrs. Margaret Handy in exchange for medical examinations of her son. Dr. Handy once buys him a cupboard in return, which is in the painting.

The Quaker, 1975, shows coats in Howard Pyle's old costume collection. One coat is a Quaker coat. It is painted during Wyeth's most productive period. Loden Coat, 1975, shows Helga looking particularly German—strong, determined and blond. Helga is Wyeth's most perfect model largely because she works so hard at it. Wyeth is been lucky to have good models. Wolf Moon, 1975, shows the Kuerner house at one o'clock in the morning. Anna is chopping wood at the time. Rock Island, 1975, shows a large rock in a Maine cove which only appears above water when the tide is out. Flint, 1975, depicts a huge boulder close to Wyeth's studio in Cushing, Maine. It represents the power of the glacier that leaves it.

Barracoon, 1976, shows what Wyeth thinks is his best nude, which tries to represent something dateless. No garment dates it; it could be from any period. The woman is black and used to live in Kuerner's attic. The Clearing, 1978, shows a handsome boy named Eric that Wyeth paints in the nude. Wyeth is fascinated by his blond body hair. The painting represents more than a body but more like a deer in the woods, sexually powerful, open. Spring, 1978, is an odd picture of Karl Kuerner that has a pulling quality. It shows Karl old and getting sicker. Karl is in a snow drift, looking timeless. Open House, 1979, is a tempera of a house on a Maine back road that rents out horses to ride. Nel, 1979, shows Wyeth's dog's Nel with an odd look on her face.

Night Sleeper, 1979, is one of Wyeth's most important paintings, which again shows Nel with a strange expression. It is painted on a huge panel and it mixes Pennsylvania and Maine. It is freed from temporal beginnings and ends. Sun Shade, 1981, is a highly personal image of Nel and Jacklight, 1980 shows a deer on Wyeth's property eating apples, though Karl Kuerner kills and guts it later. French Connection, 1980, shows Wyeth's father's studio with a costume hanging on the door. The costume is likely owned by an aide to Napoleon III. It is probably similar to one worn by the Marquis de Lafayette and represents Wyeth's strong feelings about the Revolutionary War. Thin as Vanity, 1981, shows Adam Johnson's granddaughter whom Wyeth meets at his funeral. Wyeth has her pose for him, though she has some epileptic fits in the middle of it so the project is set aside for months.

Blowing Leaves, 1980, shows leaves floating through the air and intends to capture the instant of the leaves floating down. Big Top, 1981, is a painting that shows a wagon in the moonlight, an authentic wagon from 1812 that hauled gunpowder. Rack at Kuerners, 1983, has a rack of caribou antlers hung in a tree; Betsy is responsible for it. Wyeth has already drawn the rack and put the winter scene in with it. Flour Mill, 1985, shows a flour mill on the water that has been there since the Revolutionary War and the whole picture looks like wheat flour, which keeps the picture from being trite. Sailor's Valentine, 1985, shows a lighthouse on a Maine island that Wyeth used to own; the island has wild roses on it; the painting shows light on the roses, making them look almost wet. However, Wyeth has to leave the island because it is "too perfect for [his] personality."

Squall, 1986, shows an area in Wyeth's Maine home. The viewer can see outside to squalls in the waves that have a particularly luminous quality to them. Betsy is present in the picture, even though she is not explicitly depicted. Cornflowers, 1986, shows Anna Kuerner in the back of her house raking. In the picture she is eighty-six and holding a long-handled rake at six-thirty in the morning. Rafters, 1985, shows a white dory in a barn at Broad Cove in Maine. Wyeth is intrigued by the abstract shapes it represents one morning; he notes that he is more interested in abstract shapes than many think. Rag Bag, 1986, is another Chadds Ford painting with Wyeth's dog, Killer, in it. The house has the feel of a black person's house. The picture contains a sense of triumph. Sunday Times, 1987, is another Chadds Ford painting, this time in winter. A bit of wind brings a bright piece of the Chester Times advertising supplement across the snow in the countryside, which makes the picture; he does not need to force outrageous color into the picture.

Crescent, 1987, is painting at Wyeth's mill in Chadds Ford deep in the winter under wooden beams on the porch. Last Light, 1988, is an odd picture of the last light of the day just after Christmas with a bright Christmas tree suspended in the air. It captures both the last light of day and the last light of the tree. Ring Road, 1985, is a very yellow picture with a modern road sign in it. He loves the mesmerizing sign which has almost caused him to crash on several occasions. Cistern, 1988, shows a cistern at a Quaker farm, the Wylie house. A long Quaker meeting shed is in the painting. Grey Squirrel, 1987, shows just a twinge of the real blood of a dead grey squirrel.

Fast Lane, 1987, shows the squirrel as road kill, representing the roughness of life. It is placed in the painting of a house Wyeth had been painting for months, a pre-Revolutionary home owned by a black family named Winfield. There is a contrast between the old house and the modernity represented by the roadkill. Flood Plain, 1986, shows the beginning of winter after the flood. It has a bright blue wagon cover next to car tracks, a scene that excites Wyeth. Maine Room, 1991, shows the early morning sun hitting birds on Wyeth's mantelpiece, which expresses a simple early New England house. Light covers the painting not as an effect but as enduring and light. Pentecost, 1989, is beautiful in Wyeth's view and he thinks not all of his pictures are. Wyeth feels the spirit of something when he paints it. It is painted after a girl has died after being swept out to sea in a storm. Glass House, 1991, is a portrait of a friend of Wyeth's in Chadds Ford, Mrs. Sipala. The glass around her has a great effect on Wyeth; he is searching for a feel of the change of atmosphere but the picture also has a surreal quality that he has to keep from being overdone and clichéd.

The Critic, 1990, shows Wyeth's sister Carolyn, looking a lot like his father, very alive. This is just before her stroke, one of the last pictures Wyeth does of her. Carolyn is a good painter herself. Wyeth and she are close; they cannot shock each other and both do as they please. The Liberal, 1993, shows a young lady employee of Wyeth's at Chadds Ford looking interesting, intelligent and quick with blue eyes. Her family comes from Washington and she is liberal, politically. She sits before him completely within herself, just like a liberal, in Wyeth's view. Man and the Moon, 1990, shows Wyeth's friend Jimmy Lynch's naked backside against a motorcycle with the light on. It reminds Wyeth of riding around on horses and motorcycles at night naked with his friends and local farm boys when they are young. Wyeth is intrigued by their bodies. Most people are turned off by the painting. Bonfire, 1993, shows a fire in a house where a woman has died in Chadds Ford. The bonfire is meant to honor her. Sparks shoot into high pines and it gives Wyeth a sense of the primeval. Wyeth is deeply moved by his experience. The painting is a challenge because painting fire artfully is difficult. The picture feels dangerous. Run Off, 1991, is a picture of the late winter season with a bit of wet weather and tawny fields. Wyeth tries to capture the feeling of the power of a stream that climbs overhill around a valley. The painting is based on the many walks of Wyeth's life. The painting has almost no color which keeps it from being pleasant—Wyeth's aim.

Love in the Afternoon, 1992, shows the scene outside of a blue window in Wyeth's Mill. It too captures the tawny feeling of winter. It is one of Wyeth's most mature pictures, in his view. Whale Rib, 1993, is in Maine on another island Wyeth's wife owns. It shows a whale rib next to the power and horror of a raging sea that almost takes over the island. The whale rib represents the depth of the sea. It is thrilling. Chambered Nautilus, 1956, is a painting of Wyeth's wife Betsy's mother, a remarkable woman who never had a gray hair on her head. She is a Christian Scientist and Wyeth is partly in love with her. She has a lot of vitality. The picture also has a nautilus shell near her bed, which symbolizes her. Battleground, 1981, is a portrait of George Heebner, a man who cares for Wyeth's Chadds Ford place. The tracks look like tan tracks. George is in the Second World War. The painting is called Battleground because it shows a valley where the Battle of Brandywine took place. It is a tough-looking picture because the valley is tough and

George Heebner is tough, looking for work to keep busy even after he retires—a very Germanic trait in Wyeth's view. He is a great fixer-upper. Pennsylvania in the winter is not pretty like New England. Wyeth likes the difference between the two areas.

Characters

Andrew Wyeth

Andrew Newell Wyeth is one of the most important American artists of the 20th century. Born in 1917 and living until 2009, Wyeth was an artist but primarily a painter of the realist school, focusing in particular on painting scenes of his homes in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania and Cushing, Maine. In this way, he was known as a "regionalist." Wyeth's work was very popular with the American public. Wyeth's father was also an illustrator and artist, Newell Convers Wyeth, who influenced Wyeth quite a bit. Wyeth's father trained him in art at an early age. In 1937, when Wyeth was twenty, he gave his first solo exhibition of his watercolors in New York City. His entire set sold and from there his career took off, not ending until his death.

As a person, Wyeth was apparently hard to get to know. He often hid his paintings from even those closest to him. His Helga series he hid even from his wife. Wyeth was focused on the use of sparse scenes and "bleak" colors. His work was often dry and focused on a small range of colors. He also divided his time between Pennsylvania and Maine his entire life, which kept his style realist for fifty years. He often took solitary walks in the countryside and it was on these walks that most of Wyeth's inspirations came to him. His piece Christina's World is arguably his most important.

The Olsons

The members of the Olson family were close friends of Wyeth and his wife Betsy, in Cushing, Maine. A very large number of Wyeth's paintings were paintings of the Olson home, barn, field and their indoor areas, including portraits of the family as a whole. His most important artistic inspiration was Christina Olson (1893-1968) who had an undiagnosed muscular degenerative disease that paralyzed her from the waist down. This largely confined her to the Olson home and led Wyeth to do a number of important studies of her. Wyeth saw her as spiritually gifted, particularly in her struggle to make a meaningful life for herself despite her physical challenges and immobility.

Perhaps Wyeth's most famous painting is Christina's World, a painting of Christina lying in a field, which is on display at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City to this day. Wyeth commented that his challenge in the painting was to capture her attempt to conquer life. The landscape is arid and a rural house can be seen in the distance. The Olson House is also an extremely important focus of Wyeth's artwork and is preserved to the present day. Wyeth painted in nearly every single room of the home and the areas Wyeth painted are kept looking almost exactly the same as when Wyeth painted them. Wyeth does not explain his reasons for focusing so myopically on the Olsons for so long, save to say that the home and its people intrigued him time and time again.



The Kuerners

Wyeth's best friend was arguably Karl Kuerner. Wyeth would often paint the Kuerner's home, field and objects in their home, much as he did with the Olsons. Anna was Karl's wife.

The Eriksons

Siri Erikson became one of Wyeth's primary models after Christina Olson died. She and her father, George, were the subjects of a wide range of paintings.

Helga Testorf

A Prussian immigrant who became the primary subject of Wyeth's most important series of paintings.

Thomas Hoving

The author of the introduction of the book and Wyeth's interviewer.

Betsy Wyeth

Wyeth's wife for decades who often inspired him.

Newell Wyeth

Wyeth's father, an artist himself. Newell's death helped to solidify Andrew's style as an artist.

Wyeth's Dogs

Wyeth painted a number of his dogs over the years, including Nellie and Killer.

Jimmy Lynch

One of Wyeth's close friends and a subject of some of his paintings.

Carolyn Wyeth

Wyeth's sister, with whom he was very close.

Objects/Places

Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania

Wyeth's home in Pennsylvania and the source for at least half of his paintings throughout his life. He came to know the geography of the area extremely well.

Cushing, Maine

Wyeth's home in Maine, and also the subject of many of his paintings.

The Olson House

Wyeth painted no other building more than the Olson House, painting every one of its rooms.

The Kuerner's Farm

Another common subject of Wyeth's paintings, the farm of Karl Kuener.

The Atlantic Ocean

When he was in Maine, Wyeth periodically painted scenes that contained the ocean.

Fields

Wyeth was particularly fond of painting fields, though he struggled to keep them from looking like book illustrations.

Bleak Colors

Wyeth was well-known for his use of bleak colors.

Barns

Wyeth frequently painted barns.

Wyeth's Mill

Wyeth and his wife restored an 18th century Mill on their property and Wyeth often painted it.

Animals, Alive and Dead

Wyeth enjoyed painting animals from time to time, though often he painted dead animals.

Old Homes

Wyeth had a sense of historical connection to the past in Pennsylvania and Maine, particularly to revolutionary times, so he sometimes painted old homes.

The Sea, Scoots and Punts

Wyeth often painted old boats, including scoots and punts that had been at sea.

Themes

Realism

Andrew Wyeth is known as a realist painter. Realist painters depict what the eyes can see, often meaning that subjects are represented as they can be viewed or because they are real individuals. In other cases, subjects painted by realists are simply not idealized, but painted with "warts and all." Realism was a tendency in 19th century art and emphasized the beauty of the everyday. American realism began in the turn of the 20th century and showed modern views of what was occurring. While Wyeth does not fit directly into the 19th century realist and American realist molds, as they precede his time, he still belongs in the realist school largely speaking.

Wyeth was a realist both in that he painted real scenes and because he painted almost nothing in an idealized fashion. His paintings were limited to areas that he knew intimately, such as particular areas, homes and individuals in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania and Cushing, Maine. He often painted scenes that were particularly bleak but even these bleak colors were representative of how things really appeared. Many of his paintings tried to get at the essence of something like "Pennsylvania" which is, in some ways, an abstract idea. However, he still sought to represent the reality of the thing without distorting its appearance.

Wyeth's work was often criticized by abstract artists who were dominant in the elite art community in the mid-20th century, as abstract art was seen as somehow more sophisticated and thoughtful; however, Wyeth was uninterested in their criticisms.

Intimacy

Part of the motivation of Wyeth's realism was his interest in intimacy. Wyeth liked to be close and involved with his subjects whether they were human or even animate. Almost all of Wyeth's paintings were inspired by scenes he came upon during long, solitary walks across the countryside in Cushing, Maine and Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. He walked these areas for decades and came to know them extremely intimately. Nearly all of his paintings are of these areas and of buildings within these areas. Intimacy with the land was thus a major part of Wyeth's inspiration. Wyeth was also interested in the intimacy produced by long-standing buildings and homes, associated as they were with many periods and forms of life. For instance, Wyeth and his wife, Betsy, had an 18th century mill restored on their property and Wyeth painted it on many different occasions.

However, Wyeth was most intimate with his human subjects, several of whom he painted hundreds of times over years and years. The subjects he painted most were Christina Olson, Siri Erikson and Helga Testorf. Christina was his subject for the longest period of time. She was paralyzed from the waist down and thus lived on her family's farm most of her life, rarely leaving. Wyeth did his most popular painting of her, known

as Christina's World. When Christina died, Wyeth started to paint a young girl named Siri and then did a long series of paintings in secret of a Prussian immigrant, Helga.

Life and Death

The bleakness of Andrew Wyeth's paintings is sometimes associated with the themes of life and death. For instance, many of his paintings are painted in autumn and winter in particular, when much of the plant life has died back or is dead entirely. Wyeth is also very interested in historical oeuvres and the connection between old New England buildings and their contemporary surroundings. Wyeth's interest in life and death also extends to animals. Sometimes Wyeth paints dead animals and other times he paints animals that are alive but later notes that, say, his friend Karl Kuerner slaughtered it a few hours later. This is not to say that Wyeth is at all macabre but that he finds a lot of power in the boundary between what is living and what is dead. Another example of a boundary point is the Olson house, which Wyeth painted so very many times when the Olsons were alive but he also painted after they were dead.

When Christina Olson died, Wyeth had to find a new female subject and selected the young Siri Erikson whom he deliberately analogized with a rebirth from the death of Christina Olson. Sometimes Wyeth's portraits are attempts to achieve a kind of timeless element by showing bodies that could be from any time period, living or dead. In other cases, Wyeth is intrigued by trying to depict vitality against a backdrop of quiet, bleak scenes.

Style

Perspective

While *Andrew Wyeth: Autobiography* is written primarily in Andrew Wyeth's own words, it is worth noting that the interviewer and compiler of the book was Thomas Hoving, a former director of MOMA, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Hoving was surrounded by the most important social figures in New York City and received three degrees from Princeton, also serving as New York City's parks commissioner. He helped to massively expand MOMA from 1967 to 1977 and started to write a number of books on art-related matters, including a number of biographical works, including *Andrew Wyeth: Autobiography*. The reader will learn little about Hoving, as the focus is on Wyeth, save that Hoving, despite the high art community, considers Wyeth very talented and worth writing on, which somewhat signals an individuality of taste. Hoving is also clearly an admirer of Wyeth, given his often lofty prose in the introduction.

However, the primary perspective is that of Andrew Wyeth, whose words fill the space that his paintings do not cover. Wyeth seems to speak few words and to be a relatively private man, telling stories briefly and explaining the history of his paintings with emotional force but few words. Wyeth often speaks of important people in his life and their effects on his paintings, including his father, his wife, his subjects and his friends. There is no obvious, relevant bias for the reader to be concerned with, save that much of Wyeth's perspective on his paintings may be idealized or positively reconstructed.

Tone

The tone of *Andrew Wyeth: Autobiography* is interesting because so much of the book is full of Wyeth's paintings and nearly all of the text is focused on commenting on the paintings or issues associated with them. Thus much of the tone lies in the paintings, rather than the text. That is, the tone of the text derives from the tone of the paintings. Many of Wyeth's paintings are bleak, though not dark. They depict often wintry, wet and autumnal scenes, often appearing aged and worn. Wyeth's paintings are not exactly sad but instead have a wistful quality and attempt to connect points in time from the present to the colonial past in Maine and Pennsylvania.

Most significant, however, are the tones associated with his primary subjects, Christina Olson, Siri Erickson and Helga Testorf. *Christina's World*, Wyeth's most famous painting, depicts Christina Olson, one of Wyeth's friends who was paralyzed from the waist down, lying in a field, twisted to look across the field to her home. The painting has a kind of tragic feel but also represents an attempt to find meaning in a challenging life that many would give up on. The many paintings of Helga represent her quiet "Prussian strength" which made her one of Wyeth's favorite models. Siri represents youth and rebirth after Christina's death. In other photos, Wyeth tries to capture vitality and color against more somber backgrounds.

Structure

Andrew Wyeth: Autobiography contains no chapters. It contains an introduction by Thomas Hoving and then over one hundred and twenty paintings, page after page. The introduction explains a bit about Wyeth's background, personality and work and discusses some of his most important paintings. After all of the paintings is a massive list of important dates in Wyeth's life along with important exhibitions and a catalogue of important paintings and the years in which he painted them. Each painting, usually featured in a single page, contains a caption that gives the name of the painting, the year it was painted in. It reproduces the measurements of the painting and the materials that were used to paint it. The painting then includes a quote from Wyeth. The quotes come from Hoving's questions about the origins of the painting. The captions are Wyeth's replies to those questions. The quotes are typically terse, telling a brief story, usually how the idea of the painting came to him, or how he went about creating it or even the story of the inspiration of the painting.

All of the paintings are in largely chronological order, with only a few paintings out of that order. The story of Wyeth's life unfolds as the paintings go on. After Wyeth's early "blue skies" period, ended by his father's death, the paintings take on a very consistently autumnal and bleak style though there are changes as time goes on, despite those being hard to detect sometimes.

Quotes

"It takes a very long time to get to know Andrew Wyeth as a man and even longer to know him as an artist. He's a cover-up kind of guy in life and in art. But the key to understanding both human being and creator is to know that he is a staunch independent." (Introduction, 9)

"Of course, she's an old cripple, for Pete's sake!" (Introduction, 10).

"I wanted to get it all down, maybe out of my system. I wanted to be able to say, Everything's possible—if you believe and can get excited." (Introduction, 20)

"I think you can overdo it in simplification. You can be too Homeric, too life-eternal. I don't like that eight. It's a very fine boundary." (37)

"Brown Swiss was like doing a person's face—so complex!" (46)

"This is something you could never tell an art student." (52)

"Pictures happen; you don't sit down to make them." (59)

"In a way Siri was never a figure to be painted, but more a burst of life." (86)

"This was my most prolific period. Hell, I was painting two full careers. This picture and other important ones like Night Sleeper and Ides of March, plus all those Helga things. At the same time. Whew!" (103)

"Why do I call it Night Sleeper? Because that patch of light reminded me of the sleeper trains I used to take to Maine when I was a child. This thing just grew. I had this enormous panel and kept on and on until it was used up. I didn't want a half thought; I wanted a whole one. People think it's half Pennsylvania, half Maine." (118)

"I think it's interesting to reject things. Keeps me on my toes." (128)

"This painting is almost entirely different from all my other temperas, being almost a 'pretty' subject matter. I think it is beautiful, and I can't always say that about my paintings. I felt the spirit of something when I did it, and I believe I managed to communicate that spirit." (142)

"Carolyn and I were very, very close. She could never shock me, and I could never shock her. We did what we damned pleased." (146)

"I love snow; I love Pennsylvania in the winter. It's not pretty. New England is. ... Tough living. I like the difference between New England and this tough place." (153)

Topics for Discussion

Who is Andrew Wyeth? Why is he well-known?

How did Wyeth's art develop over his life? Describe at least two relatively distinct stages.

Describe the contrast between Wyeth's paintings in Chadds Ford and Cushing in detail.

Why did Wyeth like painting Christina Olson?

What is the significance of the Kuerner house and Karl Kuerner?

Who is Siri Erickson? Why is she significant?

Who is Helga Testorf? Why is she significant?

Do you like Wyeth's art? Why or why not?

What is distinctive about Wyeth's style? Explain in detail.