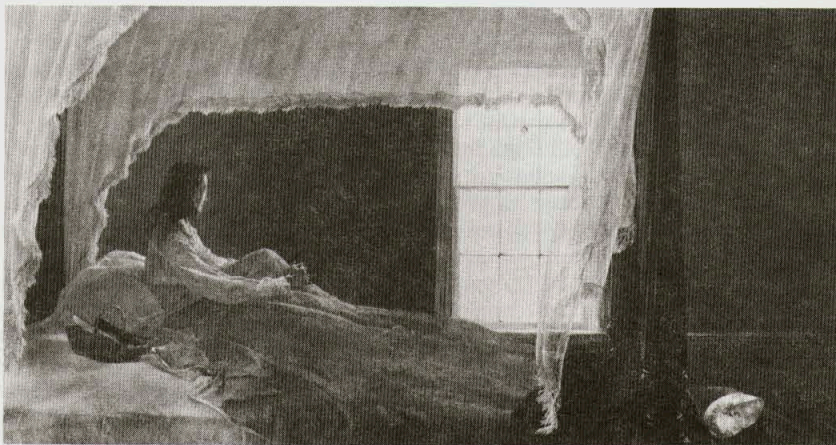


Chambered Nautilus, 1956



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"To me, it is simply the question of whether or not I can find the thing that expresses the way I feel at a particular time about my own life and my own emotions. The only thing that I want to search for is the growth and depth of my emotion toward a given object. In that way I free myself from the bonds of routine technical quality. I don't think one can develop technically in new ways unless one's emotions dictate it. To be interested solely in technique would be a very superficial thing to me. If I have an emotion, before I die, that's deeper than any emotion that I've ever had, then I will paint a more powerful picture that will have nothing to do with just technique, but will go beyond it."

Andrew Wyeth  
Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth (1978)

For much of the forty year period that Andrew Wyeth has publicly exhibited his work contemporary art has been dominated by artists who have explored abstraction. Supremely self-confident, Wyeth has clung defiantly to a highly disciplined and realistic style which has become synonymous with his name. For the last twenty years or more he has been labeled America's most popular painter, in some circles a discernably

pejorative connotation. Quite consciously he has limited himself to painting subjects within the two well-defined geographical areas of Knox County, Maine, and Chester County, Pennsylvania. His finished works are painted either in tempera, a mixture of distilled water, yolk of egg, and powdered pigment, a medium he delights in because of the richness of the colors, or in "drybrush" a variety of watercolor in which the pigment is applied with the brush wrung almost dry.

It was during the 1950's that Wyeth's mature style emerged and he became a familiar figure throughout the United States. The paintings in this MATRIX exhibition, Northern Point (1950), April Wind (1952) and Chambered Nautilus (1956), are from this important period. All three of these works are now in the Atheneum's permanent collection. Images like Northern Point, with its marked angularity and bold perspective, convey the artist's eagerness to explore unorthodox composition and capture the light of a warm summer morning. Wyeth is extremely conscious of the unique subtleties of each season and unusually sensitive to the dramatic effects light, wind, and temperature have on the impression of a subject.

Compositional ideas emerge from the observation of his surroundings and his frequent wanderings about the countryside. April Wind was the artist's response to the discovery of an old friend resting on a fallen sycamore one windy April day. The starkness of the blasted tree, the cool and restricted palette, and the figure turned away from the viewer all underscore the tenor of the season.

The intensity of observation that pervades Wyeth's landscapes is equally apparent in his portraits. Chambered Nautilus, a portrait of Mrs. Merle James, the artist's mother-in-law, was painted during her last illness



at her home in Cushing, Maine. "I did the picture right there in the room," the artist said, "and she would talk to me about her childhood in Connecticut. She was a great woman, one of those people who never grow old. It was a touching experience. I never painted her head close-up and have always regretted that." (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Andrew Wyeth, p. 58.) The portrait, however, is as much about life as it is about death. Warm sunlight, denoting the continuance of life envelopes the window in a warm glow and gilds the sitter's face, while the suggestion of nature's presence in the gentle wind flowing through an unseen open door catches and lifts the bed curtains. The nautilus shell at the end of the bed symbolizes the passing of life, the shell having outlived its usefulness to the inhabitant. It is in the tradition of the vanitas image, a visual reminder of the temporality of life, and suggests that although a person may perish physically her spirit lives on. The implication of eternity this painting conveys recalls the last stanza of Oliver Wendell Holmes' The Chambered Nautilus:

BUILD THEE MORE STATELY MANSIONS,  
O MY SOUL,

AS THE SWIFT SEASONS ROLL!

LEAVE THY LOW-VAULTED PAST!

LET EACH NEW TEMPLE, NOBLER THAN  
THE LAST,

SHUT THEE FROM HEAVEN WITH A DOME  
MORE VAST,

TILL THOU AT LENGTH ART FREE,

LEAVING THINE OUTGROWN SHELL BY  
LIFE'S UNRESTING SEA!

While many critics would set Wyeth apart from the mainstream of post-war American art there are a number of common roots. He extracts from the world around him what he wants to see and in this regard his attitudes parallel Vija Celmins, Claes Oldenburg, or Fairfield Porter. While his technique

and approach to his subject matter indicate differences, the method he employs, emphasizing some details to the exclusion of others, parallels, for example, the selective process utilized by William Bailey or Paul Wiesenfeld. Wyeth himself, however, sees his work as apart from other contemporary realists and he views some of their work as more abstract and cerebral than work by artists which on the surface seems more abstract.

Wyeth was born at Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania in 1917 and is the son of N.C. Wyeth, the creator of vivid and imaginative book illustrations. He was educated at home and benefited from his father's artistic guidance. From his first MacBeth Gallery (NYC) exhibition in 1937 he has had a popular appeal unequalled by any living American artist. Wyeth divides his year between winters in Chadds Ford and summers in Cushing. He is represented by Coe Kerr Gallery, Inc., New York City.

Richard H. Saunders  
Associate Curator of  
American Paintings

Works in MATRIX:

Northern Point, 1950, tempera on panel, signed lower left "Andrew Wyeth," 36 x 18 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection.

April Wind, 1952, tempera on panel, signed lower right "Andrew Wyeth," 20 x 26 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph R. Swan.

Chambered Nautilus, 1956, tempera on panel, signed upper right "Andrew Wyeth," 24 3/4 x 48 1/4 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum, From the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Montgomery.

Selected one-man exhibitions:  
Art Alliance, Philadelphia '36;  
MacBeth Gallery, NYC '37, '39,  
'41, '43, '45, '48, '50, '52; Doll  
& Richards, Boston '38, '40, '42,  
'44, '46, '50; Currier Gallery of  
Art, Manchester, NH Exhibition of  
Water Colors by Andrew Wyeth,  
'38; Colby College, Waterville,  
ME Exhibition of Water Colors and  
Temperas by Andrew Wyeth, '44; E.  
B. Crocker Art Gallery, Sacra-  
mento, CA Andrew Wyeth Water Col-  
ors, '45; M. Knoedler and Co.,  
NYC '53, '58; M.H. de Young Me-  
morial Museum, San Francisco  
Andrew Wyeth, '56; Albright-Knox  
Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY Andrew  
Wyeth: Temperas, Water Colors and  
Drawings, '62; Fogg Art Museum,  
Cambridge, MA Andrew Wyeth: Dry  
Brush and Pencil Drawings, '63;  
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts,  
Philadelphia Andrew Wyeth, '66;  
The White House, Washington, D.C.,  
'70; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
Andrew Wyeth, '70; M.H. de Young  
Memorial Museum, San Francisco  
The Art of Andrew Wyeth, '73;  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC  
Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth:  
Kuerners and Olsons, '76; The  
Royal Academy, London, Andrew  
Wyeth exhibition scheduled for  
'80.

Selected group exhibitions:  
Art Institute of Chicago The  
Twentieth International Exhibition  
of Water Colors, '41; Museum of  
Modern Art, NYC American Realists  
and Magic Realists, '43; American  
Academy of Arts and Letters and  
National Institute of Arts and  
Letters, NYC Annual Award Exhibi-  
tion, '47; Institute of Contem-  
porary Arts, London Symbolic Real-  
ism in American Painting, 1940-  
1950, '50; Delaware Art Center,  
Wilmington, '51; Berlin, Ameri-  
kanische Malerei, Werden Und  
Gegenwart, '51; Contemporary Arts  
Museum, Houston Americans from  
the Real to the Abstract, '54;  
Parrish Art Museum, Southampton,  
NY Loan Exhibition of Paintings  
by the Wyeth Family, '66; Los  
Angeles County Museum of Art,  
Eight American Masters of Water

Color, '68; Brandywine River  
Museum, Chadds Ford, PA The  
Brandywine Heritage, '71.

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no. 1 (January-February '77),  
p. 15+.

PLEASE NOTE:

The Two Worlds of Andrew Wyeth,  
a sound/slide presentation, will  
be shown during the exhibition.  
See calendar for dates and times.

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1979