

Art in the Classroom, January/February 2012

Painting: McVey's Barn

Artist: Andrew Wyeth, an American Painter

Painted: 1948

Type/ Size: Tempura, 25x30 inches

"I prefer winter and fall, when you feel the bone structure of the landscape - the loneliness of it, the dead feeling of winter. Something waits beneath it, the whole story doesn't show..."

- Andrew Wyeth

"It's all in how you arrange the thing... the careful balance of the design is the motion."

- Andrew Wyeth

Wyeth was a visual artist, primarily a realist painter. Wyeth paints objects that people will recognize, such as hills, cornstalks, houses, animals, country men and women going about their lives. However, if we look closer, we can see that Wyeth also paints his own vision of such objects.

He was one of the best-known US artists of the middle 20th century.

Background

Andrew Wyeth was the youngest of the five children of illustrator and artist, Newell Convers Wyeth and his wife, Carolyn Bockius Wyeth. NC was the illustrator for several well-known books: The Adventures of Robin Hood, Treasure Island. Andrew was born July 12, 1917 on Henry Thoreau's one hundredth birthday. Due to N.C.'s fond appreciation of Henry Thoreau, he found this both coincidental and exciting. N.C. was an attentive father, fostering each of the children's interests and talents. The family was close, spending time reading together, taking walks, fostering "a closeness with nature" and developing a feeling for Wyeth family history.

Andrew was home-tutored because of his frail health. Like his father, the young Wyeth read and appreciated the poetry of Robert Frost and writings of Henry Thoreau and studied their relationships with nature. Music and movies also heightened his artistic sensitivity.

Wyeth's father was the only teacher that he had. Due to being schooled at home, he led both a sheltered life and one that was obsessively focused. Wyeth could draw before he could read and received his only art lessons from his father. N.C. inspired his son's love of rural landscapes, sense of romance and artistic traditions.

With his father's guidance, he mastered figure study and watercolor, and later learned egg tempera from his brother-in-law. He studied art history on his own, admiring many masters of Renaissance and American painting, especially Winslow Homer.

In 1940, Wyeth married Betsy James whom he met in 1939 in Maine. Betsy, had an influence with Andrew as strong as that of his father. She played an important role managing his career.

Their first child Nicholas was born in 1943, followed by James ("Jamie") three years later. Wyeth painted portraits of both children. His son, Jamie Wyeth, followed his father's and grandfather's footsteps, becoming the third generation of Wyeth artists. Andrew Wyeth died in 2009 at the age of 91.

Wyeth's Art/ McVey's Barn Painting

In his art, Wyeth's favorite subjects were the land and people around him, both in his hometown of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and at his summer home in Cushing, Maine.

Wyeth's paintings show uncrowded rural scenes that are reminders of earlier American life. His subjects include old buildings with bare windows and cracked ceilings, and abandoned boats on deserted beaches. Wyeth's art portrays the remains of past activity rather than the accomplishments of the present.

Wyeth paints portraits of real people, especially his family and neighbors. He paints in egg tempera, a medium that gives his paintings a smooth, delicate detailed surface. He also uses a watercolor technique called "dry brush." Many of Andrew Wyeth's well-known paintings are serene, even gentle; a basket in the sun, or his dog sleeping on his bed. Andrew Wyeth produced artwork that became American icons.

Painted in 1948, McVey's Barn depicts the interior of a dusty abandoned barn owned by Wyeth's Chadds Ford neighbor, John McVey.

Discussion Points:

- ✿ Is this a landscape or a portrait? How do you know?

✿ What is your eye drawn to in the painting? *The abundance of hay and weathered wood boards. Wyeth's extreme attention to detail makes these items look very real. Don't you feel like you can jump right into this pile of hay! It almost appears like a photograph. Wyeth painted very precise pictures. He is quoted as saying that he painted so precisely as to record what he was seeing and loving before it was gone.*

✿ This type of painting is called **realism** because it is extremely accurate in detail and typically has textures and expressions that bring the viewer into the artwork with a sense that one could reach into the painting and feel the subjects. Much of realism is memory-based by the artist.

✿ What colors do you see? *Wyeth often uses an abundance of earth tones in the works. Would the use of different colors make you feel different about the painting? Change the mood?*

✿ Wyeth often named his artwork to suggest a sound. What does this title make you think of? What would you name the painting?

✿ Look at the picture. What time of day do you think it is?

Where is the light coming from? Is it natural? Does it come from within the picture or out? Does the light change the colors? *Wyeth often used light and shadow to make his subjects illuminate on the canvas. Does the light make it appear warm and cozy in the barn? How do you think the barn would look at night? What would the painter have done differently?*

✿ Discuss with older classes: *Notice the beam of light streaming from the window and onto the box in the barn. The sled on top and the "coffin-shaped" box hint toward a sad story. Death and decay is often a theme in Wyeth's works. Many of his works became more solemn after the passing of his father in 1945. Wyeth often paints empty spaces, distorted spaces and*

strange angles, which create settings for discomfoting emotions. The painting is a little ghost-like.

- ✿ *What sort of “lines” do you see in the painting? Vertical? Horizontal? Wyeth uses horizontal lines in the painting. Horizontal lines typically convey feelings of grounded, relaxed calm.*

- ✿ *What sort of smells can you envision? Hay perhaps, or the lingering smell of some prior animal visitors? Or a dusty, empty barn?*

- ✿ *What feelings does this painting evoke? Happy – a nice warm barn? Sad – the barn seems lonely.*

- ✿ *Does the size appear natural? No, Wyeth often altered the objects in his painting to enhance the effect his was trying to evoke.*

- ✿ *Does the angle of the painting seem odd? What does it mean to you? A small space perhaps? A good place for hide n seek? A barn for smaller animals versus large ones? Does the shape make you want to enter the barn or stay away? Does it make you interested in the barn?*

- ✿ *What else is in the barn? Do you see the sled? What do you think of now that you see the sled? We don’t see any people in this painting but yet we can make some assumptions about who owns this barn and what they may be like.*

This barn belonged to Wyeth’s neighbor and Wyeth painted this just after his neighbor died. Wyeth depicts the abandoned sled and doesn’t show its rebirth. Wyeth later recounted that the new owner took down the sled and reupholstered it in bright red velvet.

