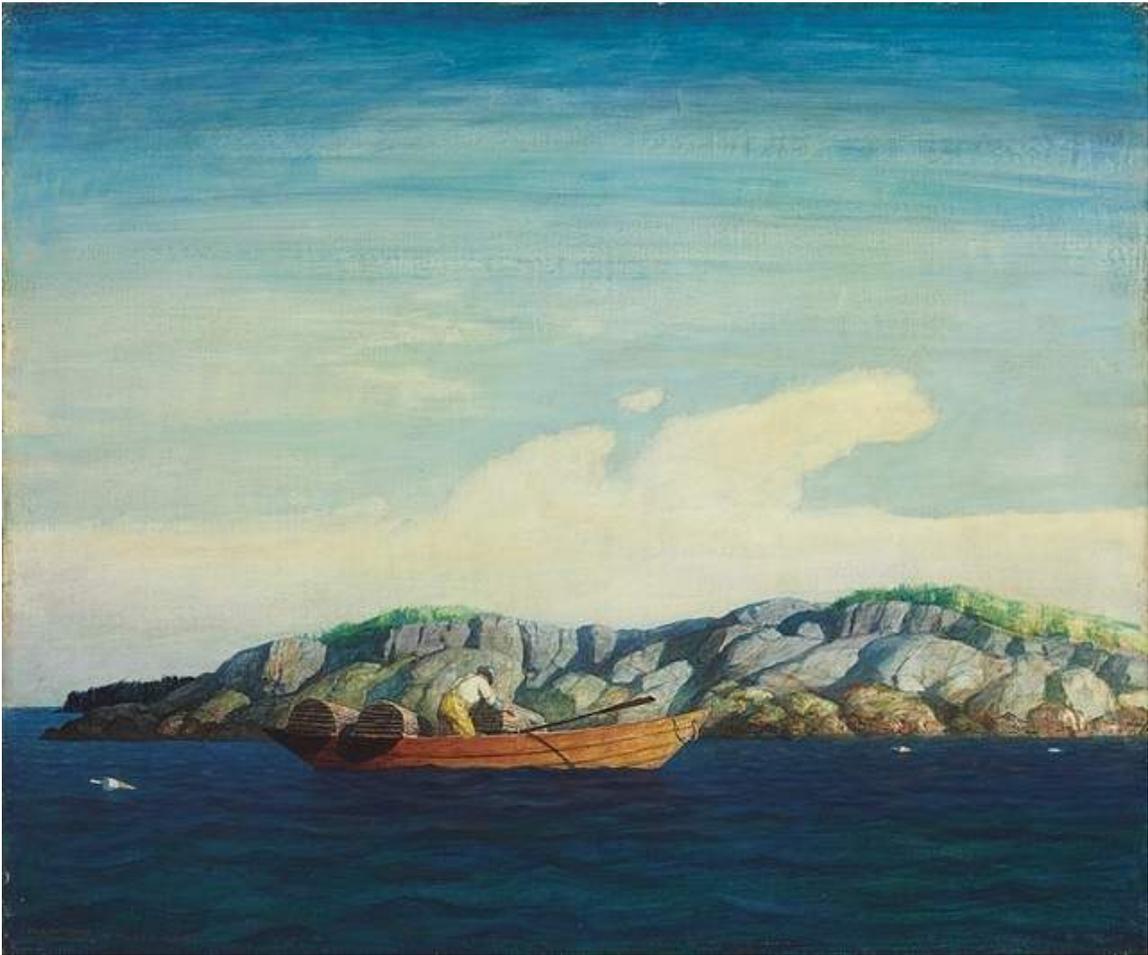


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Re-Evaluating the Wyeth Dynasty

By Stephanie Cohen



The first time Eric Sambol saw a painting by Andrew Wyeth, in 1976, he was a teenager on a school field trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He says the paintings "awoke something" in him.

"The moods and feelings in his work started a journey for me," says Mr. Sambol, who would go on to collect 13 works by Andrew Wyeth, his father, illustrator and painter N.C. Wyeth, and Andrew's son, painter Jamie Wyeth. The three generations of Wyeth men form an American art-world dynasty that has lived and painted rural America for the last century, never straying far from their homes in Chadds Ford, Pa., and Cushing, Maine. "We never traveled," says Jamie Wyeth, 66. "What interests me is a face I've known for a long time."

On Thursday, Mr. Sambol and his wife, Cynthia, are selling all 13 Wyeth works as part of the American-art sale at Christie's, the largest grouping of works by all three men to come on the market in the last decade.

The Christie's sale is part of renewed interest in the Wyeth dynasty among museums and collectors who are reassessing the place of the family, especially Andrew, in art history. Andrew is arguably one of the most popular American painters of the last century, even though he was often attacked by critics for the exact reason Mr. Sambol fell in love with him as a kid: His paintings are highly accessible. Beginning in the 1960s, his realistic depictions of rural life were often written off by critics as nostalgic throwbacks at a time when abstract expressionism was all the rage.

The Christie's sale is one of a series of upcoming Wyeth shows and sales. On May 25, "The Wyeths: A Family Legacy" will open at the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., and will include works from the three men as well as Andrew's sisters, Carolyn and Henriette; his brother-in-law Peter Hurd; and N.C.'s teacher Howard Pyle. In June, the Shelburne Museum in Vermont, will open "Wyeth Vertigo," which studies unusual perspectives in the three painters' work. In December, Christie's is planning a sale of works by Jamie Wyeth and Andy Warhol, who famously painted each other in the mid-'70s, when Jamie spent a few years in Warhol's factory in New York. Next July, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston will show a retrospective of Jamie Wyeth's work.

Andrew Wyeth has become particularly popular in China. Last year, Christie's co-hosted an exhibition of the artist's work in Hong Kong and Beijing, where academics, artists, and clients from "every corner of Asia" clamored to see his work, says Christie's deputy chairman of American art, Eric Widing.

"Most of the visitors had only seen his work as tiny reproductions in magazines—they had never seen a painting of his before," says Mr. Widing.

Experts attribute the renewed interest in the Wyeths' work in part to Andrew's death in 2009 at 91. "There is always a lot of reassessment of an artist's career once they pass," says Virginia O'Hara, curator at the Brandywine River Museum, which has an important collection of works by the Wyeth family. Two shows in particular, "Unknown Terrain" at the Whitney in 1998 and "Memory & Magic" at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta in 2005 started the shift in attitudes toward the painter along with a series of regional shows in smaller museums.

"Andrew incorporated abstraction and realism, and we've developed a more sophisticated vocabulary in realizing that it's not a case of one or the other with him," says John Wilmerding, who co-curated "Memory & Magic."

Recent prices reflect the growing interest in Andrew Wyeth's work. His figural tempera paintings have shot up in the past decade or so. In 2007, "Ericksons," priced to sell between \$4 million and \$6 million, shattered that record when Christie's sold it to an American collector for \$10.3 million. In 2009, "Above the Narrows," which had been estimated to sell between \$3 million and \$5 million, went for \$7 million to a European collector. In 2010, "Off Shore," estimated at \$1.2 million to \$1.8 million, sold for \$6.4 million.

"He's always been enthusiastically collected, but a new influx of well-heeled clients are competing for his works," says Mr. Widing.

N.C. and Jamie Wyeth have also benefited from the reinterpretation of Andrew's work. In 2006, Sotheby's BID +0.08% sold one of N.C.'s paintings, "Stand and Deliver," for \$2 million, the first time his work broke a million dollars. And Jamie has suddenly "come out into the sunlight" since his father's death, Mr. Wilmerding said. "He seems liberated."

N.C., who was born in 1882, was one of the most famous illustrators of his day. He illustrated editions of "Robinson Crusoe," "Treasure Island" and "Robin Hood," among others, but also painted the local life near the family's home.

His son, Andrew, the youngest of five children, helped his father's illustration work, but soon found his own style: a sparse realism that zeroed in on faces, animals, and landscapes just outside his door. He used the same models for years, including his Maine neighbor Christina Olson, who likely had polio and was the subject of the 1948 "Christina's World" which now hangs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Jamie Wyeth studied painting with his aunt Carolyn. His style is more closely aligned with his grandfather's and includes portraits of members of the Kennedy family, including John, Robert and Ted. A drawing of the dancer Rudolf Nureyev is for sale at the Christie's auction, estimated between \$50,000 and \$70,000.

Jamie says he often tries to buy his grandfather's work, only to lose out to collectors Steven Spielberg and George Lucas (neither of whom returned calls for comment). Jamie says he bid on N.C.'s "The Duel on the Beach" at Christie's last year but was told it went to one of the directors for \$1 million. "My grandfather would be thrilled," Jamie says.

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