

Powerful Emotions

Somerville Manning Gallery hosts exhibition in celebration of Andrew Wyeth's 100th birthday

June 6-July 29

Somerville Manning Gallery

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The 100th birthday of Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009) is July 12. It is a good time to re-examine one of the most popular and one of the most vilified American artists.

Large retrospective exhibitions and smaller, more intimate exhibitions will take place over the next few months approaching the artist and his work from the perspective not only of the passing of time but also the passing of some of his harshest critics.

Somerville Manning Gallery in Greenville, Delaware, began its association with the Wyeth family in the 1980s when it began representing the estate of N.C. Wyeth (1882-1945), Andrew's father. It has since shown Andrew's work as well as that of his son Jamie. The gallery notes, "Wyeth is a pivotal artist in the international art scene who maintained his own form of realism during a shift from modernism to abstract expression. In the face of art world criticism that favored the current mode of abstraction Wyeth steadfastly painted his own mind and style, using representationalism to express his deep innermost feelings and emotion. Careful examination of his subject and a multitude of studies was his style."

The exhibition will include works in watercolor, drybrush and egg tempera displayed in "an old textile mill on the Brandywine River, allowing the

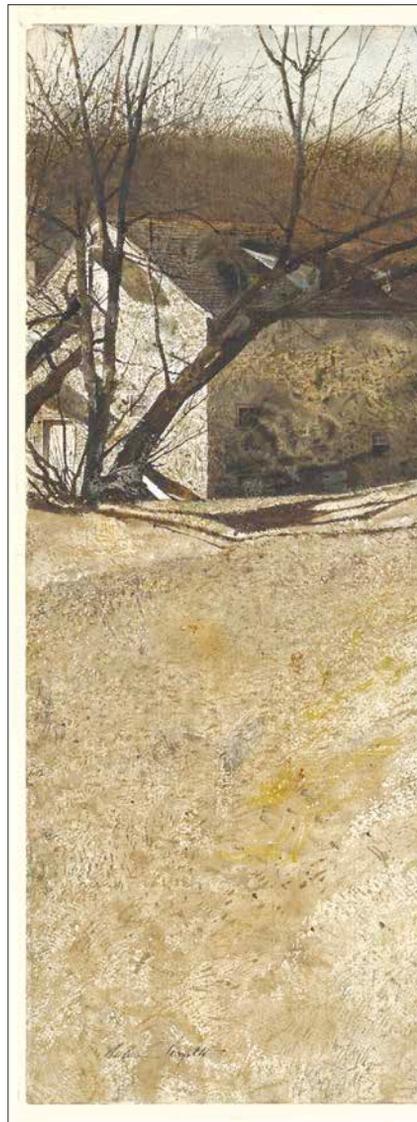
viewer to experience his painting in the light and atmosphere from which it was painted." Opening June 6, the exhibition continues through July 29.

Wyeth painted the people and places he was most familiar with and loved the most near his homes in the Brandywine River Valley of Pennsylvania and the coast of Maine. He said, "I put a lot of things into my work which are very personal to me. So how can the public feel these things? I think most people get to my work through the back door. They're attracted by the realism and they sense the emotion and the abstraction—and eventually, I hope, they get their own powerful emotion."

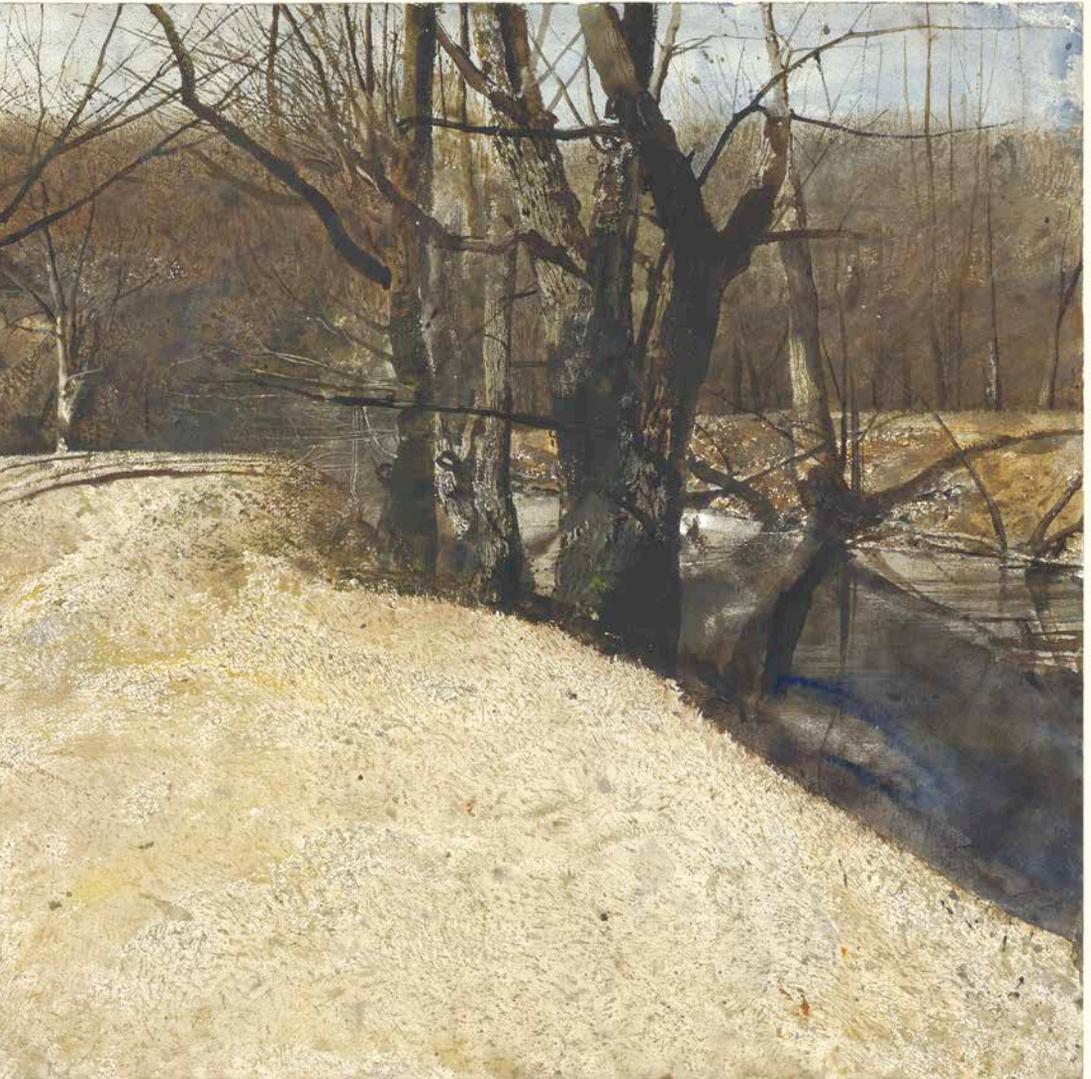
At the time of a major retrospective of his work at the Metropolitan Museum in 1976, the museum's director, Thomas Hoving, had to take over final planning of the exhibition because the curator, Henry Geldzahler, pulled out, claiming, "My clique wouldn't like having me associated with Wyeth." Critic Dave Hickey wrote that Wyeth painted with a palette of "mud and baby poop." Robert Hughes expounded that the paintings embodied "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."

Wyeth's work was also suspect among the art intelligentsia because it was popular and, perhaps worse, populist. Populism, especially today, is a difficult concept for some, especially when it results in knee-jerk reactions as narrow as those of Geldzahler, Hickey and Hughes.

At the time of the Met exhibition, Wyeth had just finished *Corn and Cist*, which will be in the Somerville Manning exhibition. In an interview with Hoving, he described his technique: "I work in drybrush when my emotion



Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009), *Corn and Grist*. Watercolor on paper, 21½ x 29½ in., signed in ink lower left: 'Andrew Wyeth'; identified and dated '1976' on a label from Nicholas Wyeth, Inc., New York, affixed to the frame backing. © 2017 Andrew Wyeth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.





Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009), *Blowing Leaves*, 1980. Watercolor, 20 x 27 in. © 2017 Andrew Wyeth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



gets deep enough into the subject. So I paint with a smaller brush, dip it into color, splay out the brush and bristles, squeeze out a good deal of the moisture and color with my fingers so that there is only a very small amount of paint left. Then when I stroke the paper with the dried brush, it will make various distinct strokes at once, and I start to develop the forms of whatever object it is until they start to have real body... Drybrush is layer upon layer. It is what I would call a definite weaving process. You weave the layers of drybrush over and within the broad washes of watercolor."

Within the description are words that are key to understanding the artist himself—"when my emotion gets deep enough into the subject..." At another time he wrote, "Really, I think one's art goes only as far and as deep as your love goes." And again: "You can have all the technique in the world and can paint the object, but that doesn't mean you get down to the juice of it all. It's what's inside you, the way you translate the object—and that's pure emotion."

Wyeth painted the mundane and the weathered both in the environment and among the people with whom he shared it. In *Corn and Grist* the landscape is as bleak and as monochromatic as it really is at the end of winter. It is a fact of life. Wyeth wrote, "I prefer winter and fall, when you feel the bone structure of the landscape. Something waits beneath it; the whole story doesn't show."

Also in the exhibition is a watercolor, *Blowing Leaves*, a representational abstraction of the built and natural environment in a brief moment of change. Shadows of the scarred trees move across the grass and the facade of the sturdy shuttered building as leaves are driven by the wind.

Wyeth's paintings of blowing leaves, curtains in open windows, fishing nets and the winter wash on a clothesline capture a breath of fresh air.

Hoving wrote that Wyeth "has always painted for himself." Wyeth wasn't that different from the rest of us. If we pause to look at his paintings we will "sense the emotion and the abstraction—and eventually..." get our own powerful emotion. ■